

# STRONG FOUNDATIONS

LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

## Eternal Torment or Eternal Destruction?

(Two passages from 'Jesus and the Other Place' by Paul Hazelden)

### *Eternal Torment*

If we want to follow Jesus honestly and faithfully, do we have to believe that the unsaved will suffer eternal torment? This question matters, because the answer we give affects a number of important issues.

- It affects the way we understand **God's goodness**. How can a good God deliberately increase the amount of suffering in the universe? How can a good God create an eternity of suffering? If we believe that God, in the end, acts like a sadist, why do we condemn sadists for the way *they* behave?
- It affects our understanding of **God's love**. "God loves you," we confidently proclaim. But if you don't do what He says, He will torment you for all eternity, we think. Most people would consider that an odd, somewhat dysfunctional, form of love. Would you want to be loved by someone who threatens to torment you?
- It affects our understanding of **God's justice**. In a fair judicial system, the punishment must fit the crime – it must be appropriate and proportionate to the offence. However bad the crime, it is hard to see how an infinite amount of suffering can possibly be considered either appropriate or proportionate. All the arguments we use when we explain why this is fair simply say that justice in God's eyes looks nothing like justice to us.
- It affects our **pastoral care**. It is hard to comfort someone who believes a dead friend or family member is now roasting over the eternal fire. And it is hard to explain why the God Who, we had assured them, loved their relative so deeply just a day or two ago, is now treating them so cruelly.
- It affects our **credibility**. The popular images of Hell are ridiculous and absurd. If people think we want them to become Christians in order to avoid the demons-with-pitchforks routine, it is no wonder they are often reluctant to respond to our message. If they hear that we want them to come and worship a monster who will hurt them terribly if He does not get His way, it is no wonder they reject our invitation.
- It affects our **evangelistic message**. Apart from misrepresenting the character of God, we find it hard to present any coherent evangelistic message if (being unable to face the alternative possibility) we tell people that their unsaved relations were probably 'really' Christians all along, and are probably waiting in Heaven for them.

Whatever we believe on this subject, it seems clear that eternal torment is not some minor theological detail: what we believe about this shapes our understanding of the character of God, our Christian faith, our evangelism and our pastoral care.

## *Eternal Destruction*

I believe that it is – just – possible to interpret the Biblical texts in a way which supports the traditional position, *but there are no Biblical grounds for doing so, and many good reasons not to.*

If you came to the Biblical texts without an awareness of the traditional teaching, you would never interpret them in that way. There is nothing in the Biblical texts which requires eternal torment of the unsaved, and a great deal which either suggests or explicitly teaches destruction. And the more we delve into the details studied by the academics – the history, language, philosophy and culture of the people who wrote the Bible – the more destruction makes sense and the less eternal torment fits the facts.

In brief:

- the traditional position is not the natural, obvious way to read the Biblical texts;
- the traditional position requires us to assume all the main writers in the New Testament were incredibly bad communicators on this vital topic;
- there are no Biblical reasons to reject the simple, obvious meaning of the relevant passages; and
- everything we learn about the people who wrote the Bible suggests that they believed in destruction rather than eternal torment.

The overwhelming weight of evidence in the Bible suggests that people who do not go to Heaven will cease to exist. The usual theological term for this idea is ‘conditional immortality’. I talk with people about this subject fairly regularly, and few have heard the term. The theological jargon is unimportant – but the idea, the truth behind the term is absolutely vital.

To summarise the clear teaching of the Bible:

- on the last day, all the dead will be resurrected;
- there will be a time of judgement before the throne of God;
- those who through Jesus have inherited eternal life will receive their reward; and
- those who have rejected God will receive their punishment and be destroyed.

When we put together all the teaching on this subject in the New Testament, it seems very likely that this destruction will not take place the moment their sentence is passed: they will be given time to understand and respond to their sentence. The process of destruction may take some time and may hurt; but when the destruction is complete, the person will cease to exist and their pain will have come to an end too.