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Remarks on Eternal Punishment

Please read Luke 16

Introduction

What does Scripture say concerning the nature of eternal punishment? Christians who take the Bible seriously believe in the everlasting nature of eternal punishment. However awful it may sound, punishment in hell is without end. The Bible also clearly outlines the characteristics of eternal punishment.

Those who advocate the doctrine of Universalism detract from the meaning of eternal punishment as regards both its length and content. They state, for example: "It is not literal punishment about which Scripture teaches. Rather it describes hell simply in a metaphorical sense, since it uses words such as fire, worm and darkness, which are only images and should not be taken literally. Where there is fire, there cannot be darkness at the same time".

Yet, Scripture makes use of these images to bring the nature of eternal punishment clearly before us:

1. unquenchable fire;
2. the worm that does not die; and
3. outer darkness.

We will consider each of these characteristics in turn (see also note 1).

The Everlasting Fire

There are several names used for this: "the furnace of fire" (Matt. 13:42,50; cf. Rev. 9:2), "everlasting fire" (Matt. 18:8), "hell, ...the fire unquenchable" (Mark 9:43). The everlasting fire of hell (Gehenna), the lake of fire, is prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41; cf. Rev. 20:10). The fact that it will not only be angels but also people who will be cast into this unquenchable fire – eternally in the company of the fallen prince of angels – will be because, during their life here on earth, they didn't turn away from the prince and god of this age who blinded their minds (2 Cor. 4:4).

This first picture describes how the godless will be tortured by the everlasting fire of judgment. Fire is a symbol of the wrath of God, who is called "a consuming fire" and the "everlasting burnings" (Deut. 4:24; 9:3; Isa. 33:14; Heb. 12:29). It is questionable, though, whether we should be thinking here of a personal attribute of God, rather than its outward expression that will strike the godless through all eternity. Indeed, are we able to imagine the "lake of fire"? This is also called "the lake of fire and brimstone", which suggests that this picture is partially derived from the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, when God rained down brimstone and fire out of the heavens (Gen. 19:24ff; compare also the word "furnace" in v. 28).

Although it is right to say that Scripture uses figurative language to describe the reality of heaven and hell, this does not in any way alter the fact that we are dealing with the real existence of real things and places. These pictures are borrowed from our earthly reality in order to give us some understanding of another, supernatural, reality.

For example, the name Gehenna (hell, see note 2) was derived from the valley of the sons of Hinnom (in Hebrew "Ge-Hinnom"), near Jerusalem, where children were burned as sacrifices to Molech and where, after Josiah's reforms, all sorts of rubbish was collected and burned (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 32:35).

The Place Where The Worm Does Not Die

Hell is also the place where the worm does not die. A comparison with Isaiah 66:24 and Acts 12:23 shows that this indicates the decomposition process of a corpse in the grave. This process started with Herod even when he was still alive, being a judgment of God because of his pride. He was eaten by worms and died.

Whereas the decomposition process in the grave normally comes to an end, this is not the case in the second death. In hell their worm (singular!) does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:48). This is often given a spiritual meaning, being connected with the never ending remorse of the lost. The gnawing of the worm would then refer to their being consumed by remorse and fear, in the agonies suffered. Since the expression "their worm" is in the singular, it would be easy to identify the worm with the individual conscience.

Although this is a very plausible explanation, one might object that it seems to ignore the "consuming" of the body. If we consider that after the end of the reign of Christ the lost will be raised and judged and then cast into the second death with spirit, soul and body (Rev. 20:5,11ff.), this suggests that even the body will be subject there to an endless destruction, to a never ending "decomposition process".

The lost themselves are referred to as "the dead", and will be assigned to the realm that is called "the second death". Here everything is marked by death; death has power over the "dead". According to Revelation 20, this second and ultimate death is "the lake of fire".

The realm of death, where the worm does not die, is therefore a place of torment in a physical sense too. This idea is confirmed by the words of the Lord Himself: "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

The Outer Darkness

The third picture given is that of the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude: 13). This picture too is taken from the earthly reality. Inside the banqueting hall there is joy and light, but outside it is night and those who are there do not share in the joy of those inside. This picture depicts the sharp contrast with the atmosphere of joy and light in the house of the Lord, in His kingdom. For this is the banqueting hall where the wedding feast is held and where fellowship with God is enjoyed, who is light and in whom is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

The unbelievers have been removed from this realm of light and love. Just like the foolish virgins, they are out in the darkness, faced by a closed door (Matt. 25:10ff.), and just like Judas, they have gone out into the night (John 13:30). They are separated from God forever and live on in darkness, far from His lovely face. In this

place of outer darkness there is not even one ray of light to be seen and there is neither hope nor expectation anymore. There is only an impenetrable darkness. It is a place of weeping, of eternal grief. There is also gnashing of teeth. This may refer not only to remorse, but also to anger, eternal rebellion against God. Weeping and gnashing of teeth are certainly characteristics both of the outer darkness and of the furnace of fire (Matt. 13:42,50). This clearly indicates that the two pictures, that of the fire as well as that of the darkness, are about the same terrifying reality.

Though shocking, it is beneficial to ponder these things, since it helps us to realize to some degree how much the Lord is to be feared (2 Cor. 5:11), and this awareness prompts us to persuade others. As has already been mentioned, this third picture of eternal punishment raises the question of how the outer darkness can be combined with the unquenchable fire of the first picture.

Fire spreads light and where fire burns it cannot be pitch dark. However, we are not to draw hasty conclusions from the physical reality around us and apply them to supernatural realities that lie beyond our understanding. On the other hand we should certainly take the concepts indicated by these pictures seriously, for example, not limiting darkness to simply "moral darkness". Scripture clearly uses these seemingly contradictory pictures in order to give us an impression, from different points of view, of the seriousness of eternal punishment.

Lessons from Luke 16

Luke 16 speaks of the state of those who have died, from the time that they die until the resurrection. When the rich man was in torment in Hades (see note 3), he said: "I am tormented in this flame" (v. 24). He was in the fire, but we don't read anything here about darkness or the outer darkness. The torment he was suffering did not impair his sight, for he looked up and saw Abraham afar off and Lazarus in his bosom (v. 23). Thus he was even allowed to catch a glimpse of the place where the blessed were: Abraham's bosom, that is, the place of the father of all believers and therefore also the place of his "children". The fact that the rich man saw Abraham (and how Lazarus was blessed) must have intensified his pain and sense of separation from God.

This refutes the theory that this story is merely about the difference between the rich and the poor. It really portrays the difference between believers and unbelievers, as well as the consequences of that difference. Of course, we are told that Lazarus was poor and the other was rich. A person such as Lazarus who is a

real "child", a follower of the believing Abraham, will inherit the heavenly blessing that is granted to him on the basis of faith (cf. Rom. 4).

Since the death of Christ the place to which deceased believers depart is called *Paradise* (Luke 23:43). The focus moves from Abraham to Christ Himself: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise". For there, of course, He is the central figure for all those who belong to Him, whom He has bought at the price of His precious blood.

Although the rich man was separated from God forever, he was still able to see. What was the nature of this "sight"? Did he simply see the brilliance of the heavenly reality out of his surrounding darkness? This may have to do with the difference between the intermediate state (the state of the deceased between death and resurrection) and the eternal state; and between Hades (the underworld) and Gehenna (hell). Gehenna, the ultimate place of torment, is without doubt the place of outer darkness. From there, any communication with the heavenly reality, a glorious reality of light and life, will be impossible.

Another possible answer to our question is that the rich man was allowed a glimpse of "Abraham's bosom" as an exception. Luke 16 does not mention the "darkness" that reigns in the place of ultimate torment, but this does not necessarily mean that there is no darkness in Hades at all. It seems quite improbable that it is a normal privilege of the dead to communicate with the heavenly reality. Indeed, what would be the purpose of this? Could this communication have been allowed in order to confront the lost still on earth with the seriousness of their position as seen against the background of the joy in heaven? Perhaps we cannot say anything with certainty about this, though we can consider these things in the light of Scripture and compare Scripture with Scripture. We should, however, be careful about drawing human conclusions solely on the basis of Luke 16.

The most important thing, in any case, is the warning nature of this story for those who are still living on earth and whose eternal destiny might not yet have been decided. Our state after death is described here in such a way that we can take these things to heart in time and obey the call of God coming to us through His Word. For the rich man's family this was "Moses and the prophets", whereas we now have access to the completed Word of God.

In the passages in Matthew's Gospel that speak about both the outer darkness and the furnace of fire (chapters 13 and 25), we find that the lost will be cast there immediately after the establishment of the Kingdom. However, in Revelation 20 we read that they will be cast into the lake of fire only after the completion of the Millennium and the last judgment before the Great White Throne. Hence no difference is made between the intermediate state and the eternal state, at least

with respect to the severity and the nature of the agony in both states being equal (just as the heavenly joy of the interim state will not differ in nature from that of the eternal state: immediately after his decease the Christian is with Christ, and that is what determines his joy).

What a blessing it is to know that true Christians have already been transferred spiritually from the realm of death and darkness into the Kingdom of the Son of God's love. They are able to live and walk in the light that will shine upon them through all eternity. With the second coming of Christ they will enjoy the fullness of salvation; then their bodies will also be snatched from the power of death.

At the same time it remains a solemn matter for those who do not yet believe and who have not responded to God's call, to seriously consider the realities of heaven and hell, and of eternal punishment. As a poem puts it: "Where, for eternity, will you stay? – Serious question of our day".

Note 1

Other pictures used are those of an abyss and a prison (Luke 8:31; Rom. 10:7; 1 Pet. 3:19-20; Rev. 9:1,2,11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1,3 cf. v. 7). The Greek words are *abyssus* and *phulakee* (1 Pet. 3:19). The word in Second Peter 2:4 translated "hell" in the King James translation and "the deepest pit of gloom" in the J.N.D. translation is the Greek word *tartarus*. This is the only place where it occurs in the New Testament. It is a term used by heathen writers for the "deepest abyss of the infernal regions".

However, these are mainly references to the punishment in an interim state; of the deceased unbelievers, of angels who have sinned and are kept until the judgment of the great day, and of Satan himself during the millennium. According to Vine's Expository Dictionary the abyss (*abyssus*) or "bottomless pit" is a description of an immeasurable depth, the underworld, the depths of sheol. In Romans 10:6-7 the abyss is contrasted with heaven, the present dwelling place of the exalted Christ.

Note 2

The Greek name *Gehenna* occurs twelve times in the New Testament (Matt. 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 12:5; Jas. 3:6). It is translated "hell" on each occasion in both the King James and J.N.D. translations.

Note 3

The Greek word *Hades* occurs ten times in the New Testament (Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27,31; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13,14). In the King James translation it is rendered "hell" on each occasion and the J.N.D. translation gives

"hades" throughout. Some manuscripts have "hades" in First Corinthians 15:55: "O grave, where is thy victory" (KJV).

