

Burning, Fire & Furnace

A Dichotomy in Doctrine

In this paper I hope to present an alternative view of some of the scriptures used to support an ever-burning hell. This is the current view held by many denominations of Christianity. The basic tenant is that a large majority of humanity will not pass judgment and burn in an ever-burning hell.

This view flies in the face of a Loving God and the Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, to save ALL of mankind.

These two views are mutually exclusive – if one is true the other is false. These can't be reconciled to each other.

From the following few verses on the words *furnace, fire, and burning*; I believe that a full reevaluation of the subject is in order.

Before we begin this study we must first rearrange our thinking to that of the ancients. As the ancient thinkers discussed the elements, usually they envisioned four: earth, water, air and fire. Some Greek thinkers (Stoics) spoke of the entire cosmos being renovated by fire; Jewish apocalyptic thinkers also envisioned the destruction or (more often) purifying renewal of the heaven and earth. Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible p.2194

Unless speaking in figurative language we must also consider fire in the sense of burning up as a physical process; one that does not include a spiritual element.

As we speak of human beings they are composed of a body (flesh and bone), life (that which makes us alive) and spirit (that which makes us unique from the animals). We can see that the body and life are physical and finite. The Bible tells us that the spirit is from God and returns to Him at our physical death.

Ecclesiastes 12:7 *and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

So when we (or the Bible) speak of someone being burned up, we must be speaking of the physical transformation of a physical body being reduced to the elements (dust). What is left has no life, and the spirit has returned to God.

Physical Destruction

Lets look at a few scriptures that speak of the physical destruction of a person (some of these verses speak in metaphorical language).

Isaiah 47:14 (NIV) – Physical Destruction

¹⁴ Surely they are like stubble;
the fire will burn them up.
They cannot even save themselves
from the power of the flame.
These are not coals for warmth;
this is not a fire to sit by.

Isaiah 66:24 (NIV) – False understanding of Hell fire

²⁴ *“And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”*

Interestingly some Bibles, even some Jewish translations, delete this verse and repeat verse 23 again. It is considered too graphic to conclude the book of Isaiah.

Job 18:5 (NIV) – Fire = Life

“The lamp of a wicked man is snuffed out;
the flame of his fire stops burning.

2 Peter 3:9-12 (NIV) – Elements Destroyed

⁹ *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

¹⁰ *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.*

¹¹ *Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.*

Reasons for God to end a persons life

Idolatry seems to be one of the most heinous sins. Many times it included child sacrifices as well as giving homage to things that weren't gods but only objects made by hand and worshipped as if it were alive and capable of effecting the outcome of events. God said that this was a grievous offence to Him.

Isaiah 30:33 (NIV) – Child Sacrifice

³³ *Topheth has long been prepared;
it has been made ready for the king.
Its fire pit has been made deep and wide,
with an abundance of fire and wood;
the breath of the LORD,
like a stream of burning sulfur,
sets it ablaze.*

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Topheth (aka: Valley of Slaughter) was a place of burning, located in the southeast extremity of the "valley of the sons of Hinnom," This is the location where child sacrifices were made to the god Molek. Baal worship was also performed here at different times.

Ezekiel 20:31 (NIV) – Idolatry & Child Sacrifice

³¹ When you offer your gifts—the sacrifice of your children in the fire—you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. Am I to let you inquire of me, you Israelites? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will not let you inquire of me.

Fire used for Purification

Numbers 31:23 (NIV) – fire = purification

²³ and anything else that can withstand fire must be put through the fire, and then it will be clean. But it must also be purified with the water of cleansing. And whatever cannot withstand fire must be put through that water.

Malachi 3:2-3 (NIV) – Purify w/ fire & soap

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,

Matthew 3:10-12 (NIV) – Wheat & Chaff

¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ "I baptize you with (in) water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with (in) the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Luke 3:16-17 (NIV) – Wheat & Chaff

¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with (in) water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with (in) the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Fire used for Testing

Isaiah 48:10 (NIV) - Testing

¹⁰ See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.

Zechariah 13:8-9 (NIV) – Testing by fire

⁸ In the whole land," declares the LORD, "two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it.

⁹ This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold.

They will call on my name and I will answer them;

I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'"

1 Corinthians 3:13 (NIV) – Fire = Judgment

¹³ their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work.

1 Peter 1:7 (NIV) – Suffering

⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Other References to Fire

Luke 12:49-52 (NIV) – Fire = Zeal

⁴⁹ "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.

Jesus seems to be saying that He came to "fire up" people to do what is right and He wishes that it were already happening. But He still had more work to do and sacrifice Himself to get the "fire" started.

Revelation 20:14-15 (NIV) – Lake of Fire

¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

John pictures two books that play the crucial role: One book represents human responsibility, so that people are judged by what they have done. This is not "works righteousness" but John's way of saying that human actions are ultimately important. The other book is the "book of life", in which God enrolled names from the foundation of the world. (Rev. 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 21:27).

This is the book of grace, in which people are saved not by what they have done but by what God has done, God's Sovereign grace and human responsibility cannot be parceled out or harmonized

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in a logical system, but John can depict a scene in which both books play a decisive role.

New Interpreter's Bible p.2238

Concluding Thoughts

From the above examples it is clear that fire, and other references to it, can mean different things. To assume that it is always a final death or worse a final reward of hell for the evil ones, shows a lack of understanding of the scriptures and God's plan for humanity.

In the references to wheat and chaff, we can deduce that we have in a person, that which is good (wheat) and evil (chaff). The fire is to remove the evil but to retain the good. Not to kill or place in an ever-burning hell.

It is clear that many times fire is used to refer to either cleansing or purification. That would imply that the things that are not of the Spirit are cleansed away and what is left is a clean person. Exactly how this is done is probably different for each person and God knows how this is to be accomplished.

Isaiah as well as others seem to prefer testing as they mention things like the furnace of affliction. This implies that by testing one learns to do things God's way and not give into our own impulses to go off on our own.

Another consideration is God's intense revulsion of child sacrifice. Since He finds it abominable for physical people to sacrifice their children, it would logically follow that He would not sacrifice His children, but find a way to turn them back to a right way of living and thinking.

When death is obvious in the verses it is only a physical death. Bad as that may seem, there is a resurrection and there is some evidence of more than one time for a resurrection. The verses in question do not address this point and thus it is easy to believe that this is the end of this person if one is not well versed in the rest of scripture.

When verses like those above are sighted as proof that there is an ever-burning hell for those who do not meet our standards (in their minds – God's standards), it thwarts the purposes of God. It leans on a false understanding of the eye for an eye principle and completely ignores God's grace and Jesus sacrifice for every person that has ever lived.

If everyone got their "just rewards" then we would all fail. Paul told us that all (meaning everyone) has sinned and fallen short of the goal. When one is in competition and one falls short of the goal; they are eliminated from the competition. It wouldn't matter if they were really close or a mile off – **they lost**.