

## Hell, Heaven...and a God of Love. Part 7

1. We will go through the rest of the scriptures that speak of the end of life in negative terms rather quickly as we've already shown how to handle quite a few others. Make sure you are caught up! Let's get to the scriptures most often quoted in opposition to universal reconciliation.
2. Hebrews 6:4-6. If it is impossible to come back...doesn't that mean you are gone forever? Remember that what is impossible for man is possible with God. Jesus used hyperbole and so do all humans, and he reminded us that God has the final say in Matthew 19:25-26.
3. Revelation 21:8; 20:10. When we enter Revelation, we are entering a book full of hyperbole, symbols, and imagery that can seem quite bizarre (but less so if you are well versed in the Hebrew scriptures). If you remember, "forever and ever" means "for ages and ages" – it is a process, not a one time event that lasts forever. Also, sulfur was used in the first centuries for purification. It was a medicine, a fumigant, a bleaching agent and as a way to cleanse impurity.
4. And the word "torment"? It could mean judicial torture (which was not to death and did not last forever) but was also used to describe the action of someone who tested the quality of gold or silver coins. That reminds us of Paul saying "saved though as through fire." This lake is a refiner's fire. If one turns from their sins and accepts the refining of God's fire, they are given a new stone with a new name (Rev. 2:17) in the Book of Life.
5. Some have asked why we should evangelize or do mission work at all if all will be ultimately saved. They misunderstand or disregard some realities, though.
  - a. God doesn't want us to die in our sins. He wants us to find Jesus first.
  - b. Our salvation is not about fire insurance, but about living like Jesus in the here and now.
  - c. There is value to being in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. The command to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves is sorely needed on this planet.

- d. The greatest growth of Christianity occurred when most Christians believed that all would eventually be saved. They understood that Jesus came to give life and that more abundantly. They had their lives transformed and welcomed others to share that same blessing.
  - e. On this earth, you can have forgiveness of sins. On this earth, you can have reconciliation with God and with others. On this earth, you can overcome harmful habits and destructive lifestyles. That is why this is Good News.
6. On the other hand, constantly warning people of hell does not sound like good news. St. Francis Xavier, perhaps the first Christian missionary to Japan, wrote this in 1522: “One of the things that most of all pains and torments these Japanese is that we teach them that the prison of hell is irrevocably shut so that there is no egress therefrom. For they grieve over the fate of their departed children, of their parents and relatives, and they often show their grief by their tears...So they ask us if there is any hope, any way to free them by prayer from that eternal misery and I am obliged to answer that there is absolutely none...”
- a. George Sarris, who I am following rather closely in this sermon, says that, in his experience, the doctrine of eternal damnation has caused far more people to be driven away from the faith than drawn to it.
  - b. Sarris then quotes a friend and fellow missionary who once taught the traditional doctrine of hell and now believes in universal reconciliation. She said “I used to be afraid to share the gospel, for fear that the conversation would come around to the subject of hell. I was afraid that someone would ask ‘what about those who have never heard?’ or ‘how can a good God allow billions of people to be tormented forever?’ or ‘What’s the point of bringing people into existence only to suffer in this life, die, and then suffer forever with no hope of relief?’”
  - c. She then goes on to say, “Now I am free to share the gospel without worrying about being trapped by good questions that have no answers. I can confidently proclaim that God is Love... At the same time, I can confidently proclaim that He is holy and righteous. He is a consuming fire and He will not let anyone get away with anything. He will do what it takes to make sinners holy, fit for spending eternity in His presence.”

7. But let's talk about the fire. God IS a fire in the Bible many times (though He IS love, He can BE a fire).
  - a. God is a consuming or devouring fire (Deut.4:24; Ezek. 1:27; 8:2; Hebrews 12:29)
  - b. Fire flows from His presence (Daniel 7:10).
  - c. God appears as a fire in a burning bush (Exodus 3:2-3).
  - d. A pillar of fire appears as God's presence (but a cloud during the day, both giving assurance and comfort) Exodus 13:21-22)
  - e. God's tongue, breath, eyes, and mouth are like flames of fire (Isaiah 30:27,33; Revelation 2:18).
  - f. Flames of fire issue from His nostrils and voice (Deut. 4:36; Isaiah 65:5; Jeremiah 23:29).
  - g. God's glory is a flame of fire (Zechariah 2:5).
  - h. Ezekiel sees God as a flashing fire that burns with splendor (Ezek. 1:4,13-14).
  - i. Both Daniel and John the Revelator envision God as sitting on a throne of fire with a face like lightning and eyes like flaming torches (Daniel 7:9-11; Revelation 1:14-15; 4:5).
  - j. Malachi sees God as a purifying or refining fire (Malachi 3:2-3; 4:1)
  - k. (thanks to Sharon Baker, "Razing Hell", pp.112,113)
  
8. Note that sins are being destroyed but nothing else is – not bushes or people. Note, also, that these are symbols given to us in symbolic language. We don't believe that heaven's streets are paved with literal gold bricks; we understand the powerful poetic and symbolic speech used there. We should be able to understand it when fire is used as a symbol, especially when it is often expressly stated to be a refining or purifying fire and certainly not an endless one or a torturous one.
  
9. Now, stay with me: God IS Love. He never states that He IS something other than love. He loves justice and is a just God, but His nature is defined by Himself as Love. He is also seen by sinful and righteous men as a fire. So...somehow the fire is an act of love. Our God is not schizophrenic or bipolar. He IS love. So, how would this work?

10. I want to emphasize here that God does not let us in on all His ways and plans. In Revelation, John the Revelator hears and sees something that the angel says he cannot write down. Paul said he saw something in heaven that it was not lawful to speak of. We can only work with what we have been given.
11. Second, when I speak of the fire refining and bringing people into the presence of God, universal salvation or reconciliation, I am NOT saying this will be the experience of those who have, in this life, come to Christ and been given forgiveness of sins by his grace. We are the sheep on the right side in Matthew 25 who are welcomed into heaven even when we think we cannot possibly deserve it.
12. A person dies who is not a Christian. Perhaps they've never seen a Christian or a Bible and never heard the Name of Jesus. One look at the throne of God and one blast of the love of God is all it would take to put them on their knees in worship.
13. Another person dies who is not a Christian. They have their sins with them and experience God as a refining fire. Is it painful to confront God and their sins? Yes! Imagine it happening this way: you have to see everything from His viewpoint. You have to feel every hurt you've caused any person. You experience all the pain you caused. At the same time, you feel the love of God, as did our brother Bobby who God reached on Death Row. He felt nothing but love and that was enough to turn him from his sins.
14. Remember that Jesus said some unfaithful servants would receive many stripes and some would receive few stripes? This seems to make sense with that and with the other scriptures we've read. How long would this process take? We have no way to know if there will be time or what time feels like after the end of all things (or just the end of us).
15. Because our God loves us, He is a fire that will cleanse and redeem the world, "For God SO loved the world..."