

“On some have compassion ... but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire...” (Jude 23)

✠ Lecture VI: The Eternal Torments of Hell ✠

Before we delve into our discussion of the torments of hell, we need, by God’s grace, to highlight the fact that these torments were not intended for humans but rather for Satan and his angels. It is written, “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire **prepared for the devil and his angels ...**’” (Mt 25:41) – Moreover, these punishments may be looked at as being self-inflicted for St. Paul said, “In accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one according to his deeds” (Rom 2:5,6) and Isaiah the Prophet said, “walk in the light of **your fire** and in the sparks **you have kindled.**” (Is 50:11)

✠ The Nature of the Torments of Hell:

While no one really wants to discover “literally” the nature of these torments, Holy Scripture provides us with many illustrations in order to deter us from sin and to lead us to repent. It may be said that as it was written concerning the heavenly reward, “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man” thus also the same words can be applied to the punishment in hell.

- Binding the hands and feet (Mt 22:13) → indicating the complete loss of freedom.
- Outer darkness, (Mt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) → indicating the alienation from God who is the true light.
- Weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth (Mt 13:42,50) → indicating sever guilt and sorrow.
- Unquenchable fire and worms that do not die (Mk 9:43-48) → indicating sever pain and suffering.
- Cutting in two (Mt 24:51; Lk 12:46) → this applies to the unfaithful servants. The portion that will be cut out may be interpreted as the gifts of the Holy Spirit that one did not use as mentioned in the parable of the talents “take the talent from him, and give to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away” (Mt 25:28,29).

✠ The Torments of Hell Are Eternal:

- “... Some to shame and **everlasting contempt.**” (Dan 12:2)
- “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the **everlasting fire ...**” (Mt 25:41)
- “These will go away into **everlasting punishment.**” (Mt 25:46)
- “... to whom the gloom of darkness is **reserved forever.**” (2 Pet 2:17)
- “Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them ... are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of **eternal fire.**” (Jude 7)
- “... for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness **forever.**” (Jude 13)
- “They will be tormented day and night **forever and ever.**” (Rev 20:10)

✠ FAQ:

Q1: Is there any contradiction between the “unquenchable fire” and the “outer darkness”?

A1: There is no contradiction. For instance, the microwave ovens generate heat without light. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of darkness indicates separation and alienation from God about whom it was said, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men” (Jn 1:4) – thus the eternal punishment is also called death.

Q2: Does the “eternal” punishment in hell come into conflict with the goodness of God? Also, how is it that a short-lived sin be punished with an “eternal” punishment?

A2: Truly, God is forgiving and long-suffering towards those who fall into sin in this life, for the time of our correction is now, in this present life, and the acquisition of His forgiveness depends on our own repentance. Moreover, God’s attributes should not be separated from each other; His Goodness and Mercy should not be separated from His Justice, Impartiality, and Righteousness. If God were to forgive all the sins of men without justice or fairness, what would be the point of alarming us with the terror of the eternal torments if, in fact, they did not exist? How is it possible for God to tell us lies instead of the truth?

→ Some have objected saying that a “short-lived” sin should not be punished with eternal punishment. In this case, neither should the reward of the righteous be eternal, for the same analogy and relationship exists between this joy and the worthiness of the deeds. God offers eternal joy to the righteous, who struggled for a time to carry out good works here on earth, but as a Just and Righteous God, He also chastises eternally the ungodly that transgressed in this temporal life because the wounds incurred from sin that are not healed in this life through the appropriate repentance will remain infected eternally. It must be clear that because there is no opportunity for repentance in the afterlife, sins will remain with the person eternally and thus the torments will also continue forever.

→ In the civil law we often hear of many cases when someone, due to the sins he/she has committed at one point or another, received a punishment which lasted many years or even until the end of his/her life. The duration of time in which the evil act itself was committed does not necessarily commensurate with the duration of the imposed punishment. Someone may spend years in prison for a fifteen-minute crime.

Q3: Is the punishment of the ungodly eternal destruction or annihilation so that they no longer exist?

A3: From the Holy verses mentioned above we can easily conclude that the ungodly will exist forever in eternal torments, “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” (**Rev 20:10**)

Q4: Will there be different levels of reward and punishment?

A4: Since the judgment will be according to one’s deeds (**Mt 16:27; Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 5:10**) and since the peoples’ deeds are not the same, therefore, there will be different levels of reward and punishment. A sin that is committed willingly is going to be punished more than the one committed unwillingly, also sins that are committed knowingly will have a more severe punishment than those committed unknowingly.

→ H.H. Pope Shenouda III uses the analogy of different jars, which are different in size but all are full to the maximum. They share the fact that they are filled to the maximum (being in heaven or hell) but differ in the volume. This analogy explains the parable of the vineyard (**Mt 20:1-16**) where those who worked for one hour were equated to those who worked the whole day. The denarius that each worker received represents the entrance to the kingdom, however within the kingdom there will be different orders.

→ **Biblical Proof:**

- “That servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few.” (**Lk 12:47; Lev 5:17**)
- “Who devour widows’ houses ... those will receive greater condemnation.” (**Mk 12:40; Lk 20:47**)
- “Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” (**Jam 3:1**)
- “It will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you ... it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for you.” (**Mt 10:15**)
- “One star differs from another star in glory.” (**1 Cor 15:41**)
- “... all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order ...” (**1 Cor 15:22,23**)

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*The Salvation that We Are Awaiting – Book IV*’ by Fr. Shenouda Maher.