

3. Understanding Human Nature (4Q 2022—Life Everlasting: On Death, Dying, and the Future Hope)

Biblical material: Gen. 1:24–27; Gen. 2:7, 19; Matt. 10:28; Eccl. 12:1–7; 1 Kings 2:10; 1 Kings 22:40.

Quotes

- I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly human can believe in everlasting punishment... I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hellfire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. *Bertrand Russell, Why I am not a Christian*
- It is the Augustinian theory [traditional view of hell] which endangers faith, and has made shipwreck of faith in the case of multitudes, by representing God as a Being of boundless injustice, caprice (sic), and cruelty. *Henry Constable, Duration and Nature of Final Punishment.*
- The idea that a good God would send people to a burning hell is utterly damnable to me—the ravings of insanity, superstition gone to seed! I don't want anything to do with such a God. *Luther Burbank.*
- If we were to ask an ordinary Christian today (whether well-read Protestant or Catholic, or not) what he conceived to be the New Testament teaching concerning the fate of man after death, with few exceptions we should get the answer: 'The immortality of the soul.' Yet this widely-accepted idea is one of the greatest misunderstandings of Christianity. *Oscar Cullmann, Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*

Questions

Why is it so important to examine and understand our human nature? How come so many people have a very different idea regarding the “state of the dead”? What are the consequences of the “majority view”? Instead of attacking other believers, how can we help people to see our perspective as “good news”? How do views of our human nature relate to the great controversy?

Bible summary

Gen. 1:24–27 tells us we are made in the image of God, and that we have a different nature to that of the animals. God shaped Adam from the dust of the ground, and breathed into him the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). Total destruction is the result of Gehenna (Matt. 10:28). At death “the dust returns to the earth from which it came, and the breath of life returns to God who gave it.” Eccl. 12: 7 FBV. David's death and burial is recorded in 1 Kings 2:10, similarly Ahab in 1 Kings 22:40.

Comment

As we consider life and death this quarter, it's essential to have a Biblical understanding of human nature. Not in the sense of the way we behave, but what we are composed of, how God made us. Basically, do we have an immortal soul or not? And that in turn must lead to a consideration of the future destiny of human beings, whether heaven or hell.

The first aspect is dealt with by understanding Genesis 2:7. God breathed into Adam the breath of life, and he became a living being. He was not given an “immortal soul.” The texts given in the Biblical material point to death as the end, and not to some soul floating away.

So what of the concept of hell. If belief in an immortal soul is accepted, along with the need for punishment, then hell is a logical corollary. But it is based on false premises, as previously noted.

What did Jesus say about hell? He used two words that are often translated as “hell”: hades and Gehenna. Hades simply means “the lower regions” which were thought by the Greeks to be the place of the dead. Jesus references such a concept when he said, “What about you, Capernaum? Will you be exalted to heaven? No, you'll go down to Hades!” Matthew 11:23 FBV. Hades was equivalent to the Old Testament word “sheol” which is often translated “grave.” There is no

thought here of unending torture in terrifying flames. Jesus' idea of hell is clearly linked with what he said about death—a sleep in which there is no consciousness (see John 11:11-14).

Gehenna is a place name. It refers to the Hinnom valley outside Jerusalem which was the trash tip! Here all the city's junk was brought to be buried or burned. There's nothing in this picture of "hell" to suggest eternal torment by demons—only a place where trash was brought to be totally disposed of. The fires burned everything up until they were completely destroyed. So too in the final trash heap of the world—all will be consumed. Jesus spoke of both "soul and body" being destroyed in Gehenna (Matthew 10:28). It's unfortunate that either of these terms should continue to be translated as "hell"—for hell is a concept from a totally different religious mythology (Anglo-Saxon and Norse) that has nothing to do with what Jesus was talking about.

So while the End does bring the total elimination of the wicked, the "hell" of Jesus and the Bible is not the traditional doctrine of endless torture.

But isn't the punishment and fire "everlasting" (Matthew 25:41, 46)? Yes. But not everlasting in its duration, only in its results. Take a Biblical example. The people of Sodom were totally destroyed, burned to ashes. And then the fire went out—it's not burning today. The Bible speaks of that fire as "eternal"—because of its eternal consequences: "Sodom and Gomorrah and the towns nearby... are provided as an example of those that experience the punishment of eternal fire." (Jude 7 FBV). An example of total destruction, not eternal burning in torment.

For if the soul is immortal, and the wicked have such souls too, then even God's end-time fire won't destroy them. The result is an ever-burning, torturing hell. But the Bible says that "The soul that sins shall die"; "God only has immortality." (Ezekiel 18:20; 1 Timothy 6:16). The Bible knows nothing of an immortal soul flying away at death either to heaven or hell, or some place in between! Belief in the complete eradication of the wicked fits in perfectly with the Bible message in which God makes all things new. (Revelation 21:5).

Imagine the perfect universe of the future that still has a place of evil, torture, agony and pain! How could that be possible? The end-time fire of destruction does not burn forever, it merely purifies and cleanses. We are to be "waiting expectantly and being eager for the coming of the day of God. That day the heavens will catch fire and be destroyed, and the elements will melt in the heat. But as for us, we are looking for new heavens and a new earth that God has promised where everything is good and right." (2 Peter 3:12,13 FBV)

Ellen White Comments

It is beyond the power of the human mind to estimate the evil which has been wrought by the heresy of eternal torment. The religion of the Bible, full of love and goodness, and abounding in compassion, is darkened by superstition and clothed with terror. When we consider in what false colors Satan has painted the character of God, can we wonder that our merciful Creator is feared, dreaded, and even hated? The appalling views of God which have spread over the world from the teachings of the pulpit have made thousands, yes, millions, of skeptics and infidels. {GC 536.2}

It is a marvel that Satan has succeeded so well in making men believe that the words of God, "The soul that sinneth it shall die," mean that the soul that sinneth it shall not die, but live eternally in misery. Life is life, whether it is in pain or happiness. Death is without pain, without joy, without hatred. Satan and his angels have made a special effort to spread the deception and lie first repeated to Eve in Eden. "Thou shalt not surely die." And as this error has been received by the people, and they have been led to believe that man was immortal, he has led them on to believe that the sinner would live in eternal misery. This has prepared the way for Satan to work through his representatives, and hold up God before the people as a revengeful tyrant, -- one who plunges all those into hell who do not please Him, and causes them ever to feel His wrath; and while they suffer unutterable anguish, and writhe in the eternal flames, He is represented as looking down upon them with satisfaction. Satan knew that if this error should be received, God would be hated by many, instead of being loved and admired... {BEcho, December 20, 1897}

