

Thank You, Father, For Eternally Punishing Me

In the movie *The Princess Bride*, the leader of the bad guys says repeatedly that it's "inconceivable" that their plans could fail. Then of course, their plans fail one by one, and each time he exclaims "Inconceivable!" Eventually, one of the other bad guys observes: "That word you keep using... I do not think it means what you think it means."

I would like to suggest that in our biblical studies, we have a similar problem with the phrase "eternal punishment." I wholeheartedly affirm the reality of eternal punishment, but I believe it may not mean what we think it means. I believe that my Papa gives me eternal punishment because he has embraced me as his child. And it's a good thing.

Let us be washed together in the living waters of the Word...

When the Bible says God is eternal, it means something like what we think it means. But the Bible also describes other, non-God things as eternal, everlasting, and forever (Hebrew: *Olam*). For example, circumcision was an everlasting covenant (Gen 17.13). Burnt offerings and new moon observances are eternal (2 Chronicles 2.4). Aaron's sons would burn incense forever (1 Chronicles 23.13), but then later they stopped. Yahweh's name/presence was at the Temple forever (1 Kings 9.3), but was later taken away (2 Kings 23.27).

Jeremiah is filled with images of eternal destruction and unquenchable fire, describing the destruction of Jerusalem. Listen to the heat of Jeremiah's prophesying: "You have kindled my anger, and it will burn forever...I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses" (17.4, 27) "I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace—everlasting shame that will not be forgotten" (23.40). "I will...make them...an everlasting ruin" (25.9). Jesus spoke often of the same topic using the same words, though he is often misinterpreted as describing what happens to bad people after they die.

But look at what happens AFTER Jerusalem's eternal destruction: "I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful" (31.3-4). "The days are coming... when this city will be rebuilt for me...The city will never again be uprooted or demolished" (31.38, 40).

The same strange pattern continues in the New Testament's concept of "eternal" (Greek: *Aionian*). You may recognize the root of the English word "eon". Paul writes to the Romans about "the mystery hidden eternally (*Aioniois*), but now revealed" (Romans 16.25-26). Jude tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah are right now undergoing "the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 1.7). But we also know that their fortunes will someday be restored (Ezekiel 16.53-55). Jude also uses odd wording to say that the chains of demons are eternal until judgment day (Jude 1.6). Ancient Greek philosopher Olympiodorus (560 A.D.) uses the same word to describe the Greek's afterlife mythology: "Do not suppose that the soul is punished for endless ages...We say that the soul is punished for an aeonian period, calling its allotted period of punishment, its aeon."

The ancient world DID have people who believed in never-ending conscious torment of wicked

souls at the hands of a vengeful deity. Babylon's Zoroastrian Farsi mythology, for example. This myth found its way into parts of Babylon's population of displaced Jews. These Jews adopted the idea, and they later became known as Pharisees (note the link to "Farsi"). They spoke of *Aidios Timoria*, which plainly means "endless torture." But Jesus contradicted them with his notion of *Aionian Kolasin*, meaning "a time of discipline." *Kolasin* is not torture, but fatherly discipline. And as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews points out, our Father will not discipline anyone who is not his beloved child (Hebrews 12:6-7). So to receive *Kolasin* from God (even eternal *kolasin*) is good news, because it is proof of sonship.

These ideas are not just academic to me. In my struggles with mental illness and addiction, I have experienced my share of aionian kolasin at the hands of my Father. His wrath is the sword that separates me from the darkness that seeks to destroy me. And it hurts like hell. Sometimes I feel like I might prefer never-ending flames, because at least then I would be able to play the victim and say God is being unjustly mean to me.

But no, God is not torturing me. He is loving me. My pain comes from the conflict between his love and my stubborn belief that his love cannot be real. My pain comes from beating my head against the wall of reality, demanding that God repent and convert to my point of view – that I am unlovable, unforgivable, unacceptable. I don't consciously think these awful things, but my feelings and behaviors tell me that these beliefs still live and thrive inside me.

But here is the good news. My Father is determined to beat the lies out of me. He doesn't care how much it hurts, and it hurts him even more than it hurts me. To him, my salvation is more important than my comfort (or HIS). That's what fatherly discipline is all about.

And here's more good news: He will keep at it for as long as it takes. This is my best understanding of what it means for punishment to be *Aionian*. When my kids get in trouble in my house, their time-out lasts as long as it needs to for them to calm down and re-enter household life as functional and responsible members of the family. God's commitment to me is open-ended in just that way. Even though his presence with me is painful (to Him AND to me), he will remain for as long as it takes, forever, if I insist.

Because he's my Dad, and that's what dads do. I would never give up on my kids. And my Dad will never give up on me. THAT is good news.

~ John Stonecypher

What Did the Church Fathers Say About Hell?

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (~200): "All men are Christ's, some by knowing Him, the rest not yet. He is the Savior, not of some and the rest not. For how is He Savior and Lord, if not the Savior and Lord of all?" "God's punishments (in Hades) are saving and disciplinary, leading to conversion." Chastisement (kolasis) is for the good and advantage of him who is punished." "We can set no limits to the agency of the Redeemer; to redeem, to rescue, to discipline, is his work, and so will he continue to operate after this life." (*Mis. B. VI, c. 6*)

ORIGEN (~203): God is a "Consuming Fire...[because he]...consumes evil thoughts, wicked actions, and sinful desires when they find their way into the minds of believers." "God's consuming fire... annihilate[es] that which harms his children." (*De Principis. I.2*)

GREGORY OF NYSSA (~370): "Whoever considers the divine power will plainly perceive that it is able at length to restore by means of the aionion purgation and expiatory sufferings, those who have gone even to this extremity of wickedness." "The soul which is united to sin must be set in the fire, so that that which is unnatural and vile may be removed, consumed by the aionion fire." (*De an. Et Res. li. P. 658*)

BASIL THE GREAT (~370): "It is the sins which are consumed, not the very persons to whom the sins have befallen." "The mass of [Christians] say that there is to be an end of punishment to those who are punished." (*De Asceticis*)

JEROME (~375): "The wrath of the fury of the Lord [comes] in pity and with a design to heal, in order that every one may return to the confession of the Lord, that in Jesus' Name every knee may bow, and every tongue may confess that He is Lord. All God's enemies shall perish, not that they cease to exist, but cease to be enemies." (*Mic. V. 8*)

THEODORET THE BLESSED (~400): "In the present life God is in all, for His nature is without limits, but he is not all in all. But in the coming life, when mortality is at an end and immortality granted, and sin has no longer any place, God will be all in all. For the Lord, who loves man, punishes medicinally, that He may check the course of impiety" (*Homily on Ezekiel vi. 6.*)

PETER CHRYSOLOGUS (~435): "Never would Christ have said, 'You will never get out until you have paid the last penny' unless it were possible for us to get cleansed...in the world to come." (*Sermon on the Good Shepherd*)

MARTIN LUTHER (~1520): "God forbid that I should limit the time of acquiring faith to the present life. In the depth of the Divine mercy there may be opportunity to win it in the future." (Letter to Hanseu Von Rechenberg in 1522)

The “Easy Yoke” and “Light Burden” of Jesus

Have you ever wondered how Jesus could say that his yoke was easy and his burden light? When you stop and consider all that he endured during his earth-walk as the incarnate Son of God, it seems to be a shocking statement to say the least.

Born as the prophesied Messiah, he had a target on his head even as a baby. King Herod felt so threatened by the prospect of the prophesied King that he sought to kill all male children in Bethlehem two years old and younger. As a youth he was, no doubt, tempted in every way to sin just as any teen would be.

When he stood in the temple to announce his identity as the anointed one of God, the people of the synagogue ran him out of town and tried to push him over a cliff. He said that he had no place to lay his head. He wept sorely for the spiritual condition of his beloved Jerusalem and was continually belittled, challenged, and ridiculed by the religious leaders of his day. He was called illegitimate, a winebibber, a sinner, and even a demon-possessed false prophet.

He endured a direct confrontation with Satan that left him so weak the very angels of heaven had to come and minister to him. He lived all of his life with the knowledge that he would be abandoned by his friends, beaten, and brutally crucified. Most of all, he knew that it was his destiny to take upon himself all of the heinous sins of mankind in order to be the sacrificial atonement for the entire human race.

Yet, given all that he had to endure he boldly proclaimed in his famous invitation to rest in Matthew 11:30 *“My yoke is easy, and my burden light.”*

I submit that the key to understanding what Jesus meant by the “easy yoke” and “light burden” lies in an understanding of what specific burden he was referring to. He seems to be declaring that all of fallen humanity carries a burden that he did not carry and he invites us to “come to him” for rest and relief from that specific burden. As cited in the observations of the above paragraphs, he certainly could not have been referring to a lack of emotional strain, concern for loved ones, or rough and dangerous physical living conditions as pertaining to this world.

Often times famous verses are quoted without the context of surrounding verses which shed much light on their meaning. If we back up to the preceding verse, I believe we get a glimpse of the intense burden of the human heart that Jesus promises rest from: *“All things are delivered unto me of My Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him.”* (Matthew 11:27).

It seems to me that what our Savior is saying is that if we come to him in faith, he will be faithful to reveal to us the truth of the Father’s heart. He is, in essence, inviting us into the perfect relationship that he alone has with the Father, where there is absolutely no burden of doubt that the Father loves us and is always faithful in that love. Through all of the trials and hardships that Jesus endured, the one burden he never had up until that faithful moment on the cross when he cried *“My GOD, my GOD, why have you forsaken me?”* was the burden of wondering about his Father’s presence and love for him.

When we see ourselves “yoked together with him” in his death, burial, and resurrection, and “born again” unto eternal life with him, we can know true rest and freedom from the yoke of

spiritual blindness that Adam gave us in the fall. When he at last said from the cross “*FATHER! into thine hands I commit my spirit*” he indicated that even though he had experienced the hellish depths of the fallen mind in feeling as if he had been abandoned and alienated from the Father, the Father had never actually abandoned him.

Jesus said in John 17:3 “*This is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, Whom Thou hast sent.*” In John 10:10 Jesus said that he came for the express purpose of restoring unto us the abundant life that the thief had stolen, (that is to say a true understanding of the character of God). It is declared further in Hebrews 1:3 that Jesus is the “*brightness of His (The Father’s) glory and the express image of his person.*”

In other words, we can trust that the Father is who Jesus revealed him to be. The entire human race is included and invited into the abundant joy of that perfect relationship in Him. May we all come to know them both in the fellowship of the Spirit and truly experience that abundant life of fellowship and perfect love that he prepared for us from the foundation of the world.

~ Brad Campbell

Our Common Witness

Pastor Doug Johannsen was recently asked to be part of a panel discussion at an inter-denominational meeting of Christians in St. Paul, MN, where he pastored New Life Christian Fellowship, the Grace Communion International (GCI) congregation in St. Paul. The theme of the day-long event was “Our Common Witness.”

In his prepared remarks Doug briefly traced the Spirit’s work in leading GCI to Trinitarian Theology. We are printing the text of Doug’s remarks as an encouragement to everyone who loves the gospel.

Let me begin by reading some of the context of the main verse being considered here today:

Luke 24: ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

When I was asked to participate in this forum, my first thought was, “Why on earth would anyone in this group want to know what I think is our Common Witness?” Many of you here today are aware that my denomination, recently re-named Grace Communion International - formerly known as the “Worldwide Church of God” - had for many years held a number of seriously heretical views.

Some of our flawed teachings included denying the Trinity. We taught that Jesus was God – sort of a younger junior God – and we didn’t know much about the Father but felt he was distant, unapproachable, mysterious – and in general, angry with humanity. You know, sort of like some of those pagan gods that were very picky and required a lot of elaborate, complicated and expensive appeasement before they’d give you the time of day – and even then you were never sure you got it “good enough” to be accepted. As to the Holy Spirit, we taught that he was not a person, but a force or power.

In the early 1990’s a few years after the death of our founder, Herbert W. Armstrong, all of this

started to change. As I recall, one of our ministers had written an article for our national publication, the Plain Truth, with the intent of refuting the Trinity. I believe it was a Catholic Priest who wrote to our HQ and in a very kind way told us that the article was inaccurate in many ways. Joseph Tkach Sr., who had been named by Herbert Armstrong as his successor, told some of our team in our Church Administration to go do the research, and if we were wrong, then change it. Our researchers found out we were indeed wrong. I believe that was in 1991 or 1992.

The real meltdown however, began in late December of 1994 with the full force of it pounding on us month after month in 1995 and slowly subsiding in the years afterward. During this time we lost around 80-90% of our membership and about the same percentage loss of employees. You see, we had taught that many of the practices given to ancient Israel were required by Christians today. For example, we refrained from eating foods such as pork and shellfish. We kept the Old Testament festivals and condemned the observance of Christmas and Easter as pagan.

Our house had been built on sand but now lay flattened by the winds and the waves of change. Yet when all those heretical beliefs were demolished, somehow we knew we had to focus on Jesus - Jesus had to be the answer. It was the same question Saul asked when being struck down on the road to Damascus, "Who are you Lord?" (Acts 9:5) The Apostle Paul's question was now our question.

The answer had to be found in the faithful witness preserved by the Church in the scriptures concerning the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. This faithful witness is also what the early Church Fathers fought so hard to preserve in their battles against heretical movements in the first centuries of Christian history.

All this attention on Jesus eventually led us to see the Father in a whole new light. We see in the scriptures that Philip had also struggled with wanting to know about the Father. He had come to know Jesus, but the Father was still mysterious – perhaps even frightening...so the faithful witness of scripture records Jesus saying to Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Having a clearer understanding of and enjoying our newfound relationship with the Father and Son led us to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who in turn re-directed our attention back to Jesus and a great appreciation for the Holy Trinity.

Let me read II Corinthians 3:12-18 to you. It is especially precious to my denomination as it clearly portrays one of the veils that had to be removed from our eyes:

II Corinthians 3: ¹²Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. ¹⁴But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have not been idle these last two thousand years, but have been

constantly at work in the Church despite our differences and disagreements. The Church is, after all, His Body. I believe that the pattern for resolving these differences is already written in the Common Witness we all share and that He will undoubtedly lead us all towards a unity and love for one another that goes far beyond mere academic consensus.

My contribution to this panel discussion is simply to affirm that by focusing on our Common Witness (that is, JESUS), transformation of not just an individual, but an entire community, and an entire denomination is indeed possible. The written witness is nearly 2,000 years old, but the One of whom it testifies is ageless and His power is not diminished.

In proclaiming this message to this world, we have all found there are many different veils covering many hearts, making many minds dull. Those veils, whatever they may be, are only removed when people or communities turn to Jesus. And when the center of human worship – individual as well as corporate – is Jesus, then the body is transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.

In Jesus' name - AMEN

~ Doug Johannsen

Check This Out: *The Jesus Storybook Bible*

Isn't it great to be aware of the Trinitarian love, life and plan that God shares with all humanity? If you're like me, you're reading the Bible with new eyes, seeing hints, stories, parallels, metaphors, history, and prophecies that tell an amazing interlocking Story. Wouldn't it have been great to be introduced to these concepts when we were kids, during those critical formative years when children and adolescents learn foundations that shape the rest of their lives? What if there were a children's Bible book that parents, grandparents and Sunday School teachers could use to introduce and inspire kids with God's Trinitarian Master Plan?

I've been involved in children's and youth ministry for over 30 years, and I just discovered the best children's Bible book I've ever read. It's called *The Jesus Storybook Bible—Every Story Whispers His Name*, by Sally Lloyd-Jones and published by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI. 2007

What makes this book special?

While some Bible story books end each chapter with a good moral lesson, it's been frustrating to me that the authors missed the opportunity to tie in each specific story to God's bigger Story: the Trinitarian love of God from eternity and into eternity personalized in the humanity of Jesus. I was excited when I read the back cover of *The Jesus Storybook Bible* that explains the universal picture the author shares:

The Jesus Storybook Bible tells the Story beneath all the stories in the Bible. It takes the whole Bible to tell this Story. And at the center of the Story, there is a baby, the Child upon whom everything would depend. From Noah to Moses to King David, every story whispers his name. Jesus is like the missing piece in a puzzle—the piece that makes all the other pieces fit together. Beautifully written and illustrated, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* invites children to discover for themselves that Jesus is at the center of God's great Story of salvation—and at the center of their story, too.

Did you catch that? “Every story whispers his name.” Each chapter gives a clear reference to God’s Son, the Lamb, the Prince, the Rescuer to come. Even with all the disobedience by man and disappointment of God recounted in the Bible stories, the author of this book repeats the refrain of the “Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love” of God.

For example, As Adam and Eve left the garden after sinning, God whispered a promise: “It will not always be so! I will come to rescue you! And when I do, I’m going to do battle against the snake. I’ll get rid of the sin and the dark and the sadness you let in here. I’m coming back for you! And he would. One day, God himself would come.”

How about this ending to the story of the Tower of Babel? “You see, God knew, however high they reached, however hard they tried, people could never get back to heaven by themselves. People didn’t need a staircase; they needed a Rescuer. Because the way back to heaven wasn’t a staircase; it was a Person. People could never reach up to Heaven, so Heaven would have to come down to them. And one day, it would.”

And in the New Testament, the stories continue to echo the Jesus-centered Story. This book tells about the apostle Paul’s mindset and teachings near the end of his life: “God loves us! He wrote from prison. ‘Nothing can ever—no, not ever!—separate us from the Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love of God he showed us in Jesus!’ And so it was, just as God promised Abraham that dark night all those years before, the family of God’s children grew and grew. Until one day, they would come to number more than even all the stars in the sky.”

Wow! What an amazing Story! And to think that my story, your story, everyone’s story are all integral parts of God’s Big Story.

The book is recommended for ages 4-7, but I believe adolescents, teens, middle-aged and senior adults will appreciate the simple but profound telling of the Story in a fresh way. And the illustrations are eye-catching and sumptuous. This is a great book for parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers and youth ministers to read to young people, and it makes a great gift for anyone who has or interacts with children. And not only for kids, I’ve read some of the stories (3-4 minutes long) in church worship services, and everyone relates to the beautiful narrative of God’s wonderful Story in Jesus—the Story that is truly Good News!

~ Lee Berger

I Don't Need to Go to Church, Do I?

We all ask ourselves that question from time to time. Maybe the music's not too good, or the morning is too cold, or we don't really like the people we worship with. There's an old joke that says a man woke up on Sunday morning and said to his wife, "I'm not going to church today. Everyone there hates me, they stare off into space when I'm talking, and they talk about me behind my back." To which his wife replied, "Honey, you've got to go, you're the pastor!"

I believe that the Christ-centered answer to our question is "Yes, we need to go to church." My reasoning is simple. When I cook supper for my family and my 6-year old says "I don't want to eat supper, I want to keep playing Mario Kart," my reply to him is "No, son, you need to come join us for supper."

Weekly worship is a foretaste of the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Like all foretastes it lacks the body, impact, and power of the full thing. But it sustains us until we are finally seated at the heavenly table where the Saints feast forever.

Every Sunday morning our Dad calls us to his table, the table prepared in the humanity (the body and blood) of his Son, and the Spirit urges us on - even amid the cold weather and the strain of broken human relationships.

We need to go to church because the Holy Trinity has called us there for our own good and for the good of others.

Besides, your pastor will be discouraged if you don't show up. Here's a great quote from Gregory of Nyssa in which he comments in his Epiphany sermon on his congregation's sporadic attendance:

I confess that I feel a shepherd's affections, and I wish, when I am set upon this watch-tower, to see the flock gathered round about the mountain's foot: and when it so happens to me, I am filled with wonderful earnestness, and work with pleasure at my sermon, as the shepherds do at their rustic strains. But when things are otherwise, and you are straying in distant wanderings, as you did but lately, the last Lord's Day, I am much troubled, and glad to be silent; and I consider the question of flight from hence, and seek for the Carmel of the prophet Elijah, or for some rock without inhabitant; for men in depression naturally choose loneliness and solitude. ~

Gregory of Nyssa, *Oration on the Baptism of Christ*

Even the great Church Father was not immune from having his congregation appear and disappear from Sunday to Sunday. Yet when they were in attendance he encouraged them to attend more faithfully - for the sake of their own spiritual health and his.

We're all a part of the Father's family in Jesus and we do need to follow the Spirit's leadership and gather at the family table on the Lord's Day.

~ Jonathan Stepp

Athanasius on the Restoration of Mankind

We're sometimes asked "Are you sure the adoption of humanity is the gospel? I've never heard it before." That's why we like to bring in the thoughts of various theologians from history to add to our understanding of the gospel.

In the following passage, from *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius of Alexandria explains how Jesus includes all mankind in his work to restore humanity's nature.

Thus by His own power *He restored the whole nature of man*. The Savior's own inspired disciples assure us of this. We read in one place: "For the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge that, if One died on behalf of all, then all died, and He died for all that we should no longer live unto ourselves, but unto Him who died and rose again from the dead, even our Lord Jesus Christ." [2 Cor. 5:14] And again another says: "But we behold Him Who hath been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He should taste of death on behalf of every man." [Heb. 2:9] The same writer goes on to point out why it was necessary for God the Word and none other to become Man: "For it became Him, for Whom are all things and through Whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through suffering." [Heb. 2:10] He means that *the rescue of mankind from corruption* was the proper part only of Him Who made them in the beginning. (*On the Incarnation*, Chapter 2, paragraph 10, emphasis ours.)

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