

December 17, 2006

“Wailing and Gnashing of Teeth:”
Eternal Punishment or Temporary Refining?

Malachi 3:1-6
Matthew 13:47-50
Luke 15:1-7

If it's true that God loves and chooses to redeem every person, in the end, into unbroken loving relationship with Him, and also that God is all-powerful—or at least powerful enough to accomplish this goal of ultimate reconciliation with all His creatures—then we've got some explainin' to do.

Because if both these assumptions are true it would mean that nobody, in the end, winds up in hell, eternally separated from God. But we just heard Jesus Himself talk about the separation of the righteous people from the evil, how the evil will be thrown into the furnace of fire. We hear of the fixed chasm between Lazarus and the rich man; we hear of the door into the wedding feast being clanged shut with some still outside. We hear about “wailing and gnashing of teeth” in the darkness more than once, and if we're honest, we have to admit that Matthew does record Jesus does talk about the nations being separated, as sheep and goats—some into eternal damnation and some into eternal life.

One option Christians do not have is to engage in muddle-headed wishful thinking; to remain in willing denial about the nature of God. How many times have you heard someone say something like, “I could never believe in a God *like that*”? or “My Jesus would never do anything *like that*”? This is not how it works, at least for monotheistic people of faith. We do not get to make up the character of God, or pick and choose a sort of designer God who happens to match our own particular whims. That God exists means we are stuck with the God who really is, God the Creator of heaven and earth—we don't get to make up a God to conform to our own image of the God we would like to believe in. This is idolatry. Almighty God is “a consuming fire” [Heb 12:29]—not a consumer accessory we may choose to order from the catalogue or not, thank you.

We always have the right, and the responsibility—one we uphold in our Congregationalist tradition—to decide whether the God we believe to exist is worthy of our worship and adoration. (Some religions, I believe, teach about a god or gods very unworthy of our ultimate allegiance—and but in no case do we get to decide what God is really like.) [The pope's recent address in Regensburg which drew such a violent response was attempting to begin a dialogue with Islam as to the nature of the One God: whether God is and must be a rational God or whether God is above reason, possibly a merely whimsical Deity—but we don't need to get into that now.] God is or God is not.

One of the great joys of the Advent and Christmas season for Christians is that we may give thanks and breath a great sigh of relief: “The Word has become flesh and lived among us...it is God the only Son, [Jesus the Christ,] who is close to the Father's heart, who has made Him known.” [John 1:14, 18] Thanks be to God, Jesus has shown the world what the One God whom we are stuck with, like it or not, is indeed worthy of our thanks and praise and allegiance and loyalty. Jesus has shown all the world, once and for all: “God is love.” [1 John 4:16]

But this still leaves us with some explaining to do, doesn't it. If we believe that Jesus reveals accurately the nature of the One God of all the peoples—and especially if we believe Jesus is Lord—then I, for one, am not about to raise my hand and bet my life,

“I disagree with You, Jesus—I believe I am wiser than You are, more diligent in prayer than You are; I believe I see the Big Picture better than You do. You are mistaken.”

Then how do we handle the dire pronouncements of divine judgment and condemnation we apparently hear Jesus and the authors of the New Testament make? I’d say we strive to understand them accurately, prayerfully, in context. In context of the teaching and the cross and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

In our Old Testament lesson we heard the prophet Malachi sound this theme of the age to come, the Day of the LORD. But that time will be no picnic: He will come also as a refiner’s fire, to refine, like impure silver and gold need to be put thru the blast of the fiery furnace until the impurities, the dross, floats to the top to be thrown away. If the gold and silver are to become pure, going thru the fire is a necessary process. Not a pleasant one, to stretch a metaphor—but a necessary one.

[The secondary image, he will cleanse “like a fuller’s soap,” underscores the exact same theme. If you’ve spent much time in Scotland or New Zealand you’ve probably been around sheep. They live in the fields, in the mud. They do not take bubble baths. Their fleeces often get filthy dirty and the fuller—the one who processes the lambswool—must apply a very powerful, very toxic bleaching agent to get the wool clean before it can be sent to market.]

But in each case the cleansing, the refining, is a temporary but powerful and necessary process toward cleanliness and purity. The temporary refining serves a greater purpose: to make the gold pure forever after. This lesson closes affirming the basis of our Advent Hope: “I, the LORD, do not change...that is why you, [unfaithful] children of the covenant, have not perished.” (It’s not because you are all so faithful: it’s because I love you!) [Mal 3:6]

The New Testament reveals the same theme. The primary word used by Matthew [translating the Aramaic Jesus spoke] translated as “punishment” of the sort sinners encounter after death (“κόλασις”) comes from the Greek word for pruning trees in order to make them grow more healthy and produce more fruit. (William Barclay observes that “in all Greek secular literature, “kolasis” is never used of anything but remedial punishment.”) That is, never punishment as “payback” or spitefulness from a bully with a bigger stick—but always temporary punishment whose purpose is the well-being of the one being punished. How much fire does the gold need? How much soap does the muddy, matted fleece need? How much punishment does the sinner need? I guess that depends. But the refining, the washing, the disciplining, does not exist for its own sake. And the last to know the proper amount would be the gold happy enough to exist so adulterated, or the filthy sheep who didn’t know it was actually white, or the sinner living opposed to God and content with a lonely and incomplete life.

[The idea that “eternal punishment” is a corruption of what Jesus was teaching has long been a position in the Church; one which goes back a long way. Clement of Alexandria, (who died around 215 AD) wrote that God’s omnipotent love is always and everywhere active, in the next life as in this one, in hell as in heaven. Origen, (who died around 254 AD) widely recognized as the sharpest theologian before Augustine, taught that God would in the end reconcile everyone down to and including back to Himself. The saintly Gregory of Nyssa (who died around 395 AD) taught that the fires of hell would eventually refine out everything base within sinners, until “...they may be restored

to God in their purity.” [cited in *The Inescapable Love of God*, p 15, Thomas Talbott. By now you know I think this is a significant and very helpful book.]

Almost all of Jesus’ references to the coming judgment, to the “wailing and gnashing of teeth” to come (such as we heard in Mt 13:47-50) can be understood as I have explained them: a punishment or a separation from God which is less than eternal—perhaps a very painful experience—but still one which is redemptive and temporary. (I would add, of course, any punishment or painful refining from the hand of God—time in “hell”—will never be more than we justly deserve, although the mercy of God shown in Christ indicates some will receive a lot less “refining” than we justly deserve.)

But to be honest, there are still a few references translated as “eternal punishment” [Mt 25:46] or “eternal destruction.” [2 Thess 1:9]. I want to acknowledge that these are present, and but do not want to go into the details of translation and context necessary to exegete them in depth. [I’d be happy to explain to anyone later on what is going on in these.] Part of the misunderstanding can be traced to translation: the word used in these examples, “αιωνιος,” is translated “everlasting” or “eternal” because the Greek had no word for eternity. You can hear our word “eon” or “long age” in this term. What is translated “everlasting” “or eternal”—normally these are used interchangeably—sometimes means “for an age,” or “for the age to come.” (Writers of the Scriptures understood world history to exist in two phases: this age and the age to come. The age to come was understood to be the time in which our relationship to God will be more immediate and God’s purposes will be carried out more immediately, ultimately—God’s redemptive purposes. God is in charge directly in the “eternal” age or age to come.)

Sometimes “eternal life” is used to emphasize the quality of life in communion with God, or the quality of life originating in God who is eternal, more than length of time: remember Jesus’ prayer to the Father “This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” [John 17:3]

[There’s a flip side, a negative example, using this word “eternal” in a way other than duration. For example, Jude 6 speaks of Sodom and Gomorrah... “undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” The fire itself is not eternal—obviously it has not been burning now for thousands of years—but it is understood to come from God who is eternal, and to pertain to God’s cleansing, refining only God can accomplish.]

Occasionally we will come across a reference in the New Testament to “eternal destruction.” [e.g. 2 Thess 1:9], and there are some believers these days who have come to settle for a belief in annihilation, a return to nothingness, when sinners die. (If the only other alternative is everlasting torture in the flames of hell, this is not a bad conclusion—a lot better than taking two aspirin.) But rightly understood this concept even of “eternal destruction” takes us right back to the theme of the eternal God, who is love, refining us, disciplining us (which may feel to us like being punished) for a time, as necessary, in order to redeem us into His presence for all time. (“God loves us just the way we are—and far too much to allow us to stay this way.”)

Any understanding of eternal nothingness, annihilation (not unlike the shadowy of concept of “Sheol” most prevalent in the Old Testament) falls short. It would allow pain to cease and evil to be put to death so that Christ could reign over a redeemed community of everyone still worthy of being allowed in His presence—but in this Jesus would be dreadfully lonely—the opposite of His intention. And still, the final destruction (as opposed to the final redemption) of all evil would also mean that many persons created in

the image of God and redeemed by Christ—persons therefore of eternal worth—would be lost to God forever. That cannot please God who loves each one of His creatures.

Paul understands well the relationship between temporary disciplining that he speaks of as “death” as a price to pay for preparation for eternal life. In an odd command to the Corinthian church: “You are to turn this man [who has been living with his stepmother] over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” [I Cor 5:5]

In this understanding we hear this theme all over again, in a different set of images. The Scriptures speak of what is not of God, not yielded to God, not pure, not worthy of His presence, not redeemed by Christ, as needing to be put to death, refined away. Sin, ugliness, blemish, ignorance, evil, rebelliousness: what remains set against God cannot stand in His holy presence. Paul understood this more than anyone: he had been deadset against Christ and His Church; He was redeemed by the mercy of Christ, and made alive. He could say “Whoever has died has been freed from sin;” [Romans 6:7] “It is not I who lives but Christ in me.”

Paul understands this “death” to be painful, no doubt: being redeemed, saved, made alive again involves the crucifixion or death of the sinful element, the false element of our own nature—and that cannot be pleasant. (“I have been crucified with Christ” [Gal 2:19b] This purifying may even feel like the destruction of who we are, depending how closely we associate with Jesus and how closely we associate ourselves as a free agent non-aligned with God.)

The process of being refined away from everything in us which keeps us from experiencing the love of God, may feel like torment or it may feel like grace. The same process of refinement which begins in this lifetime, which Paul experienced big-time, is the process which goes on for as long as we choose—as long as it takes. (God loves us; God has created us for intimate communion with Himself and with each other. God will not ultimately settle for our sin or separation from Him. God’s redeeming love means business, because God just keeps coming after us, forever, until we are safely Home.) As you know: God’s pursuing, purifying love sometimes feels to us like mercy, and sometimes like wrath, depending whether we are choosing to obey the will of God or oppose Him. When I try to bicycle into a fierce headwind I curse it; when I repent and do a 180, I am swept along on the Way by a strong tailwind and I give thanks for it. Same wind; different orientation toward it, different feeling about it. Same love of God, in this life and forever: “I, the LORD, do not change...”

Many of you know that Jesus used a word-picture for this purifying which was never intended to be understood literally. He referred to a local scene familiar to those who knew Jerusalem: the garbage dump in the valley outside the walls was in the Hinnon valley, or Gehenna. The ashes were always smoldering, occasionally flaring, and it never smelled very good. At the very least, you wouldn’t want to wind up spending much time in Gehenna. But we need to be clear where Jesus was using symbol and where He was speaking literally.

For what it’s worth, I believe our life after death will never be more severe than God’s justice and our own attitudes require. I expect the first element of our life in “heaven”, in “the age to come” will include our literally experiencing the pain (the pain for which we have not already repented, not already submitted to the merciful Judge) or the blessing we have caused others to feel—and then the ramifications of their influences,

throughout the generations, like rippling circles. (In real-time on earth, this alone could take a good portion of eternity!) Experiencing the pain we have caused others, and for which we have refused to humbly repent, would be devastating—made bearable only by the fact that we are accompanied thru the worst of it by Jesus, in His mercy, or His angels.

The Judge is a merciful judge; His forgiveness is always available. We are not stuck forever on the heartless wheel of karma, rising or falling by our actions. Our free will is never abridged: we get to keep hanging on to what is taking us down, hurting ourselves and others, as long as we like. (Just like in this lifetime!) We get to offer it to Jesus and be done with the refining whenever we like, also.

But experiencing something of the good we have done others will also be far greater than we expected. How many of you are teachers, or nurses, or managers who spend energy every day going out of your way, treating others with love and respect. You may never hear more than a perfunctory thank you, if that, for months at a time...you may have no idea how you have been blessing others. (I just heard recently of the case of a pastor who is now a very effective preacher and evangelist whose college roommate one year was endlessly patient in telling him about Jesus. The current preacher only ridiculed him, and would give his roommate no satisfaction—but later started to read the gospels, started to ponder what his roommate had been saying. He never tracked down that roommate, who therefore never had any earthly idea what fruits his efforts had borne.)

(I also trust that God is quite capable of creating the next realm, the next “age,” to provide us all for yet more opportunities to learn our lessons, to become more like Christ, to face great challenges and to feel great loves while growing into the creature we were created to become.)

During the Advent season, paradoxically, we look forward to the End. Jesus shows us that God is love, but warns His followers God’s love is no trifling sentiment. His is not necessarily a nice little fire for toasting marshmallows at leisure—He is a consuming fire. God’s love may feel like a consuming fire which is killing you.

Trust in God. You all know better than to continue to oppose Him. You cannot escape His loving will, in the end, but you may wish, for a time, that you could. You and I choose: heaven or hell, continuing this moment and every moment. No flames, no harps, no asphalt of gold, no pitchforks. If we want to identify so closely with our own appetites, our own independence, our own goals and ambitions, our own agenda, then we will surely curse the constant and refining love of God which is designed to separate us from what keeps us away from our eternal fulfillment and growth and communion with God.

Far better, as you all know, to allow Him to find us—to say good-bye to everything that keeps us away from Him. Far better to experience His love for what it is: mercy, forgiveness, fullness, the satisfaction we are becoming who we were created to become, in communion with the One who created us for this eternal purpose. Our free will is never transgressed; we always get to choose.

The good news of Advent is that the baby Jesus grew up to become the Good Shepherd. God has come to us in Christ to seek and save the lost. Only the lost can be found. The Good Shepherd drops everything to bring the stray sheep back into the fold.

Protesting it or enjoying the ride, each sheep is brought safely Home. As long as it takes, each sheep is brought safely Home.

Malachi 3:1-6

3:1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight--indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap;

3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

6 For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.

Matthew 13:47-50

47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;

48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous

50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and **gnashing of teeth**.

Luke 15:3-7

3 So he told them this parable:

4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'

7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.