

Eternal Reward and Punishments: A Fresh, Biblical Look at God's Love and Justice in Heaven and Hell

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Every theological writer knows *seminal* writing is rare. From the Latin word *serere*, which means "to sow," writing that is seminal represents only the seed (*semen*) of a future and greater harvest of truth. For example, Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517) declared it is "*faith that justifies*," not the sacrament. Luther's writing, though thoroughly biblical, was deemed heretical by the Roman Catholic Church. Five centuries later Luther's heresy has become evangelical orthodoxy and widely accepted.

Luther's writing on justification by faith was seminal, but seminal *theological* writing is rare because as Solomon declared:

"Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new"? Already ***it has existed for ages*** which were before us" (Ecclesiastes 1:10).

Truth exists independent of its discovery. The only thing ever lost is our understanding of it. "*God's word is truth*" (John 17:17), so rare is the individual who uncovers truth long lost by God's people. God's word never changes; but our comprehension of it does. The Dark Ages brought about the loss in human understanding of what it means to be made right with God through faith in Jesus alone. Luther's writing was seminal in that it only uncovered the pre-existent and eternal truth. The greatest opposition to Luther's writing on justification by faith came from church leaders who adhered to centuries of church dogma on the subject. Nothing is different today. Accepted church dogma can be the greatest hindrance to discovery truth via *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone).

It is possible that some seminal theological writing has taken place in the late 20th century and early portions of this century. New Testament scholars such as F.F. Bruce, Edward Fudge, John R.W. Stott, Richard Bauckham, John W. Wenham, and others have written on the subject of death, resurrection, the judgment, and after life, rejecting Plato's separation of soul and body and holding to what they call *the biblical truth of indivisible unity between body and soul*.

To these writers, the Hebrew word *nephesh* describes the life of man as soul and body united, with the consequence of sin being death the whole person, both body and soul. Since the essence of mortal man is seen in body and soul united and not in the Platonic concept of an independent, immaterial soul that exists apart from the body, these New Testament scholars declare that the unique and profound teaching of God's Word, both in the Old and New

Testaments, is *the resurrection of individuals from the dead* to face either judgment and ultimate death (i.e. 'the second death'), or to be given the gift of everlasting life through Jesus Christ.

In summary, the potential seminal theological writing of these modern scholars revolves around the following biblical truths:

(1). God alone possesses immortality (I Timothy 6:16), and the gift of God is eternal life to only those who receive everlasting life through Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

(2). Death destroys the mortal human being, but "there is coming a day when all those who are in the tombs will hear His voice" (John 5:29) and be resurrected by His power.

(3). All who are resurrected from the grave will either be judged and punished for the way they lived their lives (John 5:29), or will escape the 'day of wrath' and be given the gift of eternal life which Jesus earned as the reward for His people (Revelation 20:12).

(4). Since the punishment of the wicked is just and equitable, the Day of Judgment will reveal the righteous condemnation of God, with the wicked receiving various sentences of length and intensity, some punishment being more severe than others (Matt. 10:15).

(5). Hell is a holy place where the vengeance of God is meted out in direct portion and measure to the sins and crimes committed by each creature judged, with the final end of the wicked being their utter destruction, called "the second death" (Rev. 20:14).

Ironically, Martin Luther had a hand in these modern seminal writings. Both Martin Luther and William Tyndale believed that "the dead are asleep, and feel nothing at all." Time is inconsequential during this sleep, taught Luther, so regardless of the passage of time on earth after one's death, the next conscious thought after closing one's eyes in death is the awareness of hearing the voice Christ and feeling the power of the Creator in being raised from the dead. For those who wonder at the power of God to raise the dead after millennium of corruption and cellular dissolution, one only has to look at the universe to see the majesty and power of the Creator to call into existence by fiat the things that are.

John Calvin opposed Luther's belief in the "the sleep (death) of the soul." At the tender age of 25, Calvin published *Psychopannchia*, a refutation of Luther's belief in the death and resurrection of the soul and body, what some call "the conditional mortality of the soul." Today's modern biblical scholars are taking a fresh look at a subject that Luther first tackled, but unlike 'justification by faith,' Luther's teaching on the conditional mortality of the soul has not yet blossomed into evangelical orthodoxy, even though Luther's writings on conditional immortality were comparable to his writings on justification by faith in both *biblical* depth and breadth.

The Implications

I am teaching a series of lessons next spring entitled *Eternal Reward and Punishments: Where the Love and Justice of God Meet*. It will be my intent to show that the Bible seems to teach various degrees of eternal punishments (hell) for sinners apart from Christ, and an eternal inheritance or reward (singular) for sinners who trust Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

Contrary to the those who say Christians will receive various rewards in heaven based on their works on earth, the word 'reward' is always singular in the New Testament, and represents 'eternal life.' Jesus 'earned' this reward for His people by His perfect obedience, and gives immortality as a gift on those who trust Him. Those who reject the Son will face the anger of the Son as Jesus judges the wicked (Psalm 2:12).

I will seek to show that hell is actually the place where there are various degrees of punishments (some might even say 'rewards'). It is in hell that 'good deeds' are rewarded by a lighter sentence of punishment. For example, a person who lives a moral, selfless life, but dies without Christ, will receive a far less severe punishment than the rapists, serial murderers, and child abusers who die without Christ. The end of both is the same (the second death), but the manner in which they arrive at their ultimate destruction will be different. The Bible teaches that hell is real, hell is penal (punitive), and hell is eternal.

However, the eternal part of hell in Scripture seems to be the end result (the second death), not the process of punishing. In other words, the eternality of hell, according to Jesus and the authors of the Bible, is not the torment, but the end result (death) after various degrees of punishment have been meted out. Thus, Jesus declares:

*"Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able **to destroy both soul and body in hell**" (Matthew 10:28).*

Of course, those evangelicals who have believed in the eternal torment of the wicked in hell find it rather shocking to consider that the 'gift of God,' called eternal life (John 3:16), is never given to the wicked. The wicked are not eternal. The end of the wicked is made quite clear in the Scriptures.

A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity..
(Psalm 37: 10-11)

The wicked are like chaff that blows away.
(Psalm 1:4)

The wicked will be punished with everlasting destruction
and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.
(II Thessalonians 1:9)

As Edward Fudge writes, "The wicked will not enjoy any of God's blessings that the redeemed enjoy, because they will *perish* (Romans 2:12). They are *anathema*, which means marked for *destruction* (I Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9). This is not some theoretical statement that might really happen and might not. No, God will *destroy* them (Rom. 2:12; I Cor. 3:17). Paul says it in every way he can say it. The wicked will suffer *destruction* (Gal. 5:21; 6:8; Phil. 1:28; 3:19). That *destruction will be sudden when it comes (I Thess. 5:3), and once accomplished, it will be everlasting (II Thess. 1:9).*" (*Hell: A Final Word*, page 128).

For those Christians who object by saying, "But Jesus said in the parable of the sheep and the goats that These (the goats) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into life eternal' (Matthew 25:46). Doesn't eternal punishment mean eternal punishment?"

Great question. Yes it does. But the correct answer to your question revolves around what the adjective 'eternal' modifies. Let me explain.

We read in the Bible of "*eternal* salvation" (Hebrews 5:9), "*eternal* redemption" (Hebrews 9:12), "*eternal* judgment" (Hebrews 6:2), "*eternal* punishment" (Matthew 25:46), and "*eternal* destruction" (II Thessalonians 1:9). These activities of God represent both His love and grace as well as His righteousness and justice. These works of God will not be fully known or experienced by us until the age to come.

But there is something very interesting about these eternal activities of God.

- (1). Eternal salvation is the result of saving
- (2). Eternal redemption is the result of redeeming.
- (3). Eternal judgment is the result of judging.
- (4). Eternal punishment is the result of punishing.
- (5). Eternal destruction is the result of destroying.

Why is it we Christians correctly point out that the Bible teaches the process of God saving us is not eternal, but the results of salvation are eternal; while at the same time we contradict Scripture and logic itself by proclaiming the process of punishing is eternal, and refuse to see the that it is the end result of punishment (death) which is eternal?

In short, ***that which is eternal is always the result of the action of God not the action itself.***

Eternal salvation results from saving that stops. Eternal redemption results from redeeming that stops. So too, eternal punishment results from punishing that stops. Eternal destruction results from destroying that stops.

The Principle

The reward of every believer in Jesus Christ is eternal life, a reward (singular) won by the perfect obedience of Christ on behalf of His people. The notion that there will be different degrees of enjoyment in heaven based upon one's meritorious works on earth is both contrary to the teaching of Scripture and the principles of grace.

But on the other hand...

The degrees of punishment, retribution and vengeance in hell will vary according to the actions of a person in this life. The moral, good and selfless person who rejects Christ will find the process of punishing and the progress toward his ultimate destruction (the second death) less painful, more tolerable, and ultimately unequal to that of a rapist, serial murderer, etc... All the wicked will end up like 'chaff blown away' (Psalm 1:4), but the process of dying the second death will vary according to 'the deeds done in the body.'

The Bible declares that this process of dying the second death in the Divine prison (hell) will include distress (Romans 2:9), fury (Romans 2:8), tribulation (Romans 2:9) and resentment (Luke 13:28) as God's wrath is judicially measured and meted out according to the individual's crimes committed on earth (Romans 2:8; I Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9). In the end, the Lord removes the wicked.

"The face of the LORD is set against those who do what is evil,
to erase all memory of them" (Psalm 34:16).

Truth is eternal. It is yet to be seen if the writing of these evangelical, Bible-believing, Christ-exalting New Testament scholars is seminal theological writing. Ultimately, the answer to that question will be found in people who are unafraid to question the traditions of men (or the church) and accept sola Scriptura.

More to come....