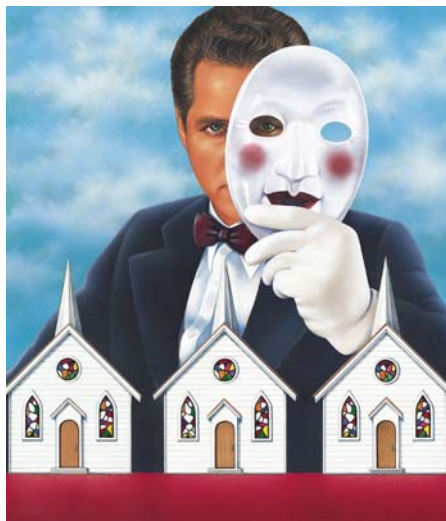

Who Framed God?



IN THE 1700s and 1800s, hell was much more popular as a sermon topic than it is now. One of the most well-remembered of such sermons is Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," describing a furious God holding people over the flames of hell and taking pleasure in their eternal suffering.

Does the Bible really teach that sinners will burn forever? Does it teach that God is so angry that His wrath will *never* be satisfied? How can God be so cruel, angry, and vengeful, yet we call Him a God of love? Though it may sound odd, the Bible has good news about hell!

Thoughts to Remember:

- ♦ Many ministers today teach of eternally burning hell to make people afraid of God so they'll live righteous lives. World-famous philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote: "There is one very serious defect...in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I myself do not feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment..."
- ♦ The devil campaigns to spread the terrible error of eternal hell to paint a distorted picture of Christ. He wants to frame God for his own crimes. He also wants people to be afraid of God, knowing that humans can't love what they fear.
- ♦ **"The Lord is not willing that any should perish** [not "burn forever," but "perish"], **but that all should come to repentance"** (2 Peter 3:9). Some ask, "Why destroy sinners at all? Isn't God a God of mercy?" When Adam and Eve sinned by rebelling against God, death also entered the world. **"For the wages of sin is death"** (Romans 6:23). It helps to view sin as a fatal, inherited disease that takes the life of every sinner who doesn't accept God's intervention.
- ♦ The Bible does NOT teach that hell burns for millions and trillions of years. It teaches that when Jesus comes, He destroys sin and all traces of it (including sinners who rebelliously cling to sin) and then re-creates the beautiful earth as it was in Eden.
- ♦ In a parable to His disciples, Jesus said, **"Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age"** (Matthew 13:40). By this He indicated that sin, Satan, and sinners would be destroyed at the end of the age. There is no hell right now, and destruc-

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tion won't occur until Jesus comes again. "Then the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished" (2 Peter 2:9).

• "...The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth; those who have done good, to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:28, 29). "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (John 25:46). Everlasting punishment? Yes; punishment whose **results** are eternal. The punishment itself is not eternal, only the results. The wicked dead will remain dead for eternity and will never live again.

• A confusing text is Jude 7 (Jude only has one chapter): "As Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them...having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire." But if Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the vengeance of eternal fire as many people understand it now, shouldn't the cities still be burning today? 2 Peter 2:6 clears up the misunderstanding: "...And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to **destruction**, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly." Again we see that the Biblical use of "eternal" to describe fire refers only to the fire's results—not to the flames themselves.

• The Bible teaches that one day the wicked will be consumed by the fire of God's holy presence. Does this sound harsh, not like a loving God? God will save everyone He possibly can. Only the wicked who absolutely will be lost—and the Bible says: "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the sovereign Lord" (Ezekiel 18:32). • But the wicked shall perish: and the enemies of the Lord, like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away" (Psalm 37:20). "And they [the wicked] shall be as though they had never been" (Obadiah 16—Obadiah has only one chapter).

• Let's look at some texts that use "forever" and figure out what they mean from the Bible.

■ "...And he [a servant in ancient Israel] shall serve him [the Israelite master] forever" (Exodus 21:6). You may want to read the full chapter to get a better context. But clearly the servants of ancient Israel are not still living and serving today. ■ 1 Samuel 1:22 says that the mother Hannah took her son, Samuel to the temple to "there abide forever." Again, this simply means "as long as a person may live." ■ "And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17). Yet Jonah later said of his time in the whale, "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me forever" (Jonah 2:6). He simply meant "until the end of the experience;" ■ "But if you will not heed me to hallow the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched" (Jeremiah 17:27). The fire would not go out until there was nothing left to burn.

The "take-home" message for you . . .

• Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him: and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7). *Now* is the time to accept God's mercy and grace.

Just between you . . . and God:

• Wouldn't it be better to share God's joy in heaven than to have Him weep over you as a lost soul? "I had such beautiful plans for you," He will say, "I was so looking forward to being with you." Why not be with Him in a beautiful new earth for eternity? He truly is a loving, merciful God—not a God who burns sinners forever.

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