

God's Mercy and Justice

Fire and brimstone is a pejorative term used to describe a motif in Christian preaching which uses vivid descriptions of judgment, and the damnation to Hell of sinners forever to encourage repentance out of fear of divine wrath and punishment.

The Puritan preacher Thomas Vincent (an eyewitness of the Great Fire of London) authored a book called "Fire and Brimstone in Hell," first published in 1670. In it he quotes from Psalm 11:6 "Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and a horrible tempest, this shall be the portion of their cup."

The idea of fire and brimstone didn't originate with him. Several Biblical passages use the image of burning brimstone (the ancient name for sulphur) to represent divine wrath. The King James translation often renders such imagery with the phrase "fire and brimstone". In Genesis 19, God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah via a rain of fire and brimstone, and in Deuteronomy 29, the Israelites are threatened with the same punishment should they abandon their covenant with God. Elsewhere, divine judgments involving fire and sulphur are prophesied against Assyria (Isaiah 30), Edom (Isaiah 34), Gog (Ezekiel 38), and all the wicked (Psalm 11).

Fire and brimstone frequently appear as agents of divine wrath throughout the Book of Revelation, culminating in chapters 19–21, wherein the devil and the ungodly are cast into a lake of fire and brimstone as an eternal punishment:

And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. (Revelation 19:20, KJV)

And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (Revelation 20:10, KJV)

But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death. (Revelation 21:8, KJV)

As with most Biblical passages, there is disagreement over the interpretation. A common view is that they represent an active inflicting of punishment by God. Others suggest that they are supposed to show how sinfulness and rejection of God's love can result in serious problems. It is also suggested that they do not refer to anything specific at all; rather, the

image is intended to simply produce fear and so compel belief.

Now, as a church, we believe that God is just as well as merciful, that righteousness has its own reward and that sin does not go unpunished. In the first chapter of Mosiah, for example, we read: “Whereof, they shall be judged, every man, according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil; And if they be evil, they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord, into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return: therefore, they have drunk damnation to their own souls. Therefore, they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God, which justice could no more deny unto them than it could deny that Adam should fall, because of his partaking of the forbidden fruit; therefore, mercy could have claim on them no more for ever. And their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up for ever and ever.” (Book of Mormon, Mosiah, 1:126-129). In common usage, this is known as karma: “What goes around comes around.”

Joseph Smith is not the only one to have formed this understanding of God’s justice. This century is remarkable for the number of apparitions of Jesus and Mary. Perhaps the most well known is Our Lady of Fatima, but there have been other such appearances. In each case the message that is being transmitted to us is that God loves us with infinite love and compassion, and calls all of humanity to a loving friendship with him by repenting of our sins and converting our lives into conformity with His commandments. However, we are also being told that we must choose whether we will meet Him through the gates of His Mercy, or the gates of His Justice. There are no other options: indifference or indecision is, in effect, a choice for God's Justice!

In 1931, Jesus appeared to a young nun by the name of Sister Faustina (Helen Kowalska). She came from a very poor farm family and had only three years of very simple education, and hers were the humblest tasks in the convent, usually in the kitchen or the vegetable garden, or as a porter. Nevertheless, she was shown a vision and given a message concerning God’s mercy for all humanity. In addition, however, she was also shown hell: “Today I was led by an Angel to the chasms of hell. It is a place of great torture:

1. the first torture that constitutes hell is the loss of God;
2. the second torture is perpetual remorse of conscience;
3. the third is that one's condition will never change;
4. the fourth torture is the fire that will penetrate the soul without destroying it- a terrible suffering, since it is a purely spiritual fire, lit by God's anger;
5. the fifth torture is continual darkness and a terrible suffocating smell, and, despite the darkness, the devils and the souls of the damned see each other and all the evil, both others and their own;
6. the sixth torture is the constant company of Satan;

7. the seventh torture is horrible despair, hatred of God, vile words, curses and blasphemies.

Of course, we do not always understand God's working, but we do know that it is not quite as simple as all that. In the story of Job, for example, God allows Job to be inflicted with many great hardships, and his friends try to explain to him that it must be because of something that he has done – that was the common belief at the time: God would reward people for their good works and punish them for their sins. Finally, God takes them to task for their foolishness and demands that they tell Him where they were when He laid the foundations of the universe, as if to say, "How can you possibly understand what I may choose to do?"

Nevertheless, we generally think of God to being just as well as merciful, and while we may not believe in a literal Hell of fire and brimstone, most of us do espouse justice as well as mercy (although a smaller number of us may kid about the fact that "it is no good deed that goes unpunished.").

Which brings us to a contemplation of our own place in the world.

If we could shrink the earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all the existing human ratios remaining the same, here's what you would have:

57 Asians

21 Europeans

14 Americans (i.e., the combination of North and South America

8 Africans

52 females

48 males

70 non-whites

30 whites

70 non-Christians

30 Christians

89 heterosexuals

11 homosexuals

6 people would possess 59% of the entire world's wealth and all 6 would be from the United States

80 would live in substandard housing

70 would be unable to read

50 would suffer from malnutrition

1 would be near death

1 would be near birth

1 (yes, only 1) would have a college education

1 would own a computer

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head, and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of the people in this world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more blessed than the million who will not survive the week.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation, you are ahead of 500 million people in the world.

If you can attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture, or death, you are more blessed than three billion people in the world.

If your parents are still alive and still married, you are very rare, even in the United States.

If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful, you are blessed because, while the majority can, most do not.

If you can hold someone's hand, hug them or even touch them on the shoulder, you are blessed because you can offer healing touch.

If you can read this message, you just received a double blessing in that someone was thinking of you, and furthermore, you are more blessed than over two billion people in the world that cannot read at all.

Have a good day and remember to ask God for His mercy rather than for His justice.

I would like to share with you a story called the Thousand Marbles:

A few weeks ago, I was shuffling toward the kitchen with a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and the morning paper in the other. What began as a typical Saturday morning turned into one of those lessons that life seems to hand you from time to time. Let me tell you about it.

I turned the volume up on my radio in order to listen to a Saturday morning talk show. I heard an older sounding chap with a golden voice. You know the kind, he sounded like he should be in the broadcasting business himself. He was talking about “a thousand marbles” to someone named “Tom.” I was intrigued and sat down to listen to what he had to say.

“Well, Tom, it sure sounds like you're busy with your job. I'm sure they pay you well but it's a shame you have to be away from home and your family so much. Hard to believe a young fellow should have to work sixty or seventy hours a week just to make ends meet. Too bad you missed your daughter's dance recital.”

He continued, “Let me tell you something Tom, something that has helped me keep a good perspective on my own priorities.” And that's when he began to explain his theory of a thousand marbles.”

“You see, I sat down one day and did a little arithmetic. The average person lives about seventy-five years. I know, some live more and some live less, but on average, folks live about seventy-five years.” “Now then, I multiplied 75 times 52 and I came up with 3900. This number represents the number of Saturdays that the average person has in their entire lifetime. Now stick with me, Tom, I'm getting to the important part.” “It took me until I was fifty-five years old to think about all this in any detail,” he went on, “and by that time I had lived through over twenty-eight hundred Saturdays.”

“I got to thinking, that if I lived to be seventy-five, I only had about a

thousand of them left to enjoy.” “So, I went to a toy store and bought every single marble they had. I ended up having to visit three toy stores to round up 1000 marbles. I took them home and put them inside of a large, clear plastic container right here in my workshop next to the radio. Every Saturday since then, I have taken one marble out and thrown it away.”

“I found that by watching the marbles diminish, I focussed more on the really important things in life. There is nothing like watching your time here on this earth run out to help you get your priorities straight.”

“Now let me tell you one last thing before I sign-off with you and take my lovely wife out for breakfast. This morning, I took the very last marble out of the container. I figure if I make it until next Saturday, then God has really blessed me with a little extra time to be with my loved ones....”

“It was nice to talk to you Tom, I hope you spend more time with your loved ones, and I hope to meet you again someday. Have a good morning!” You could have heard a pin drop when he finished. Even the show's moderator didn't have anything to say for a few moments. I guess he gave us all a lot to think about.

I had planned to do some work that morning, then go to the gym. Instead, I went upstairs and woke my wife up with a kiss. “C'mon honey, I'm taking you and the kids to breakfast.” “What brought this on?” she asked with a smile.” “Oh, nothing special,” I said, “It has just been a long time since we spent a Saturday together with the kids. Hey, can we stop at a toy store while we're out? I need to buy some marbles.” At that moment I realized that life is so precious and yet so very short.

“Have a great weekend and may all your Saturdays be special, and may you have many years after you lose all your marbles.”

The Fool's Prayer

The royal feast was done. The king
Sought some new sport to banish care
And, to his jester, cried, "Sir, Fool,
Kneel now and make for us a prayer."

The jester doft his cap-and-bells,
And stood, the mocking court before.
They did not see the bitter smile
Behind the painted grin he wore.

He bowed his head and bent his knee
Upon the monarch's silken stool.
His pleading voice arose, "Oh, Lord,
Be merciful to me, a fool.

These clumsy feet, still in the mire,
Go crushing blossoms without end;
These hard, well-meaning hands we thrust
Among the heartstrings of a friend."

The unkind word we might have kept,
Who knows how sharp it pierced and stung?
The word we had not sense to say,
Who knows how grandly it had rung.

Our faults no tenderness should ask.
The chastening stripes must cleanse them all.

But for our follies, oh, in shame
Before the eyes of heaven we fall.”

The room was hushed. In silence
Rose the king, and sought his gardens cool.
His pleading voice arose, “Oh, Lord,
Be merciful to me, a fool.”