

Do the Damned Suffer Eternally?

by Sebastian R Fama

Seventh Day Adventists believe that the fires of hell are eternal. However, they do not believe that the punishments received there are eternal. Those who go there, they contend, are consumed by the fires and are no more. To support their claim, they will appeal to various Old Testament verses. For instance: "For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost..." (Ecclesiastes 9:5). But as the New American Bible points out: "The book [of Ecclesiastes] is concerned with the purpose and value of human life. While admitting the existence of a divine plan, it considers such a plan to be hidden from man." Two verses in particular make this clear:

He has made everything beautiful in its time; also, he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward, and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:18-21).

Many of the things that were not so clear in the Old Testament became clear in the New Testament. And that is exactly what Paul tells Timothy: "... our savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and **brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel**" (2 Timothy 1:10).

And what does the Gospel say about the nature of hell? Matthew 25:46 says: "And they will go away into **eternal punishment**, but the righteous into eternal life." If the damned cease to exist, the punishment would not be eternal. Incidentally, if the occupants of hell are not eternal, why would the fires of hell be? Once everyone who was destined to go there went off into nonexistence, the flames would no longer be needed. The fact that the fires of hell are eternal indicates that the punishments received there are eternal. That there might be no doubt as to the true nature of hell; Peter borrows a word from Greek mythology to describe it. In 2 Peter 2:4 the word rendered as hell is Tartarus (Τάρταρος). Tartarus, is a place of eternal torment.

The early Church had no problem understanding the nature of hell. Justin Martyr wrote:

No more is it possible for the evildoer, the avaricious, and the treacherous to hide from God than it is for the virtuous. Every man will receive the **eternal punishment** or reward which his actions deserve. Indeed, if all men recognized this, no one would choose evil even for a short time, knowing that he would incur **the eternal sentence of fire**. (*First Apology* 12 [A.D. 151]).

And so, the Church teaches what she has always taught; the punishments of hell are eternal.