

Hebrews 6:8 in the Navajo Bible

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Nidi bikáa'gi hosh índa ch'il deeníní hanoot'áago, éí doo ílígóó baa nitsáhákees, índa doolchxqołgo bá ha'doodzihgi bich'í' hoolzhish, áko t'óó kq' bee adidoolk'ááł. (Hebrews 6:8)¹

But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. (Hebrews 6:8)²

Introduction

In Hebrews 6:8 we have a description of what happens to those who do not love and obey God. The clause *áko t'óó kq' bee adidoolk'ááł* ("In the end it will be burned") is a reference to the end of the world and the ultimate fate of the wicked.

Some Biblical Data

What exactly is that fate? We just read it here in the present verse. The symbol of "thorns and thistles" is a reference, not to plants, but to people. "In the end [they] will be burned." This is not a teaching that requires any great proof. Christians of all persuasions, and others besides Christians (Jews, Muslims), believe in a final punishment of the wicked by fire. But once we have said this much, there are still some points to clarify. There are different ways to understand this teaching and, being different from each other, they can't all be right.

The fire is unquenchable

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff [*azhool*] with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:12; see also Luke 3:17)

It would be possible to read passages such as Matthew 3:12 to mean that the fire never stops burning, that the punishment of the wicked is eternal torment in flames. I grant that some passages leave this impression. But our theology can't be based on one or two passages only. If we believe in a complete Bible, whatever we believe about the punishment of the wicked – or anything else – must be consistent with all other passages that bear on the same topic.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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The Navajo expression *kp' doo nitséesii* ("fire that won't go out") could be read to mean that the fire burns on forever. For that matter, in other contexts (the Greek poet Homer, for example), the Greek expression *pur asbestos* ("unquenchable fire") could be read that way. But in passages such those cited below it can't be. Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture or we are at sea without chart or compass. So the present context is the one we must work within.

Anyone who has ever had their house burn down will know what "unquenchable" means. It doesn't mean the fire burns forever. It only means you're not able to put it out. So Matthew 3:12 is clear just as it reads, but we must understand it correctly.

The fire does its work quickly

By speaking of "thorns and thistles," Hebrews 6:8 (quoted above) taps into a current of symbolism that can be seen in both the Old Testament and the New. What are the Bible writers trying to say when they appeal to such symbolism? Let's look at some examples in order to find out. We begin with a passage that refers to "burning thorns" in passing as an illustration. But notice what point the writer is using it to illustrate.

They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns [*ch'il dadeeníinii*]; in the name of the LORD I cut them off. Psalm 118:12

In Psalm 118:12, when the author wants to say that his enemies were destroyed quickly, he compares their situation to that of thorns being burned up in a fire. In many passages the idea of burning up thorns – or briars, or stubble – is used to describe a fire that does its work quickly. This is a reference, not to a process that drags on forever, but to one that takes only a short time. The following passages confirm that the wicked are consumed (Isaiah 9:18; 10:17; Joel 2:5; Obadiah 1:18; Nahum 1:10), burned up (Isaiah 47:14), so that nothing whatever is left. It doesn't take forever to burn dry weeds.

Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briars and thorns [*ch'il ahoshí áádóó ch'il deeníní*], it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke. (Isaiah 9:18)

The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briars [*bich'il deeníní áádóó bich'il ahoshí*]. (Isaiah 10:17)

The peoples will be burned as if to lime; like cut thornbushes [*ch'il deeníní yildee'go*] they will be set ablaze." (Isaiah 33:12)

Surely they are like stubble [*ehégod*] the fire will burn them up. They cannot even save themselves from the power of the flame. Here are no coals to warm anyone; here is no fire to sit by. (Isaiah 47:14)

With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble [*ehégod*], like a mighty army drawn up for battle. (Joel 2:5)

The house of Jacob will be a fire and the house of Joseph a flame; the house of Esau will be stubble [*ehégod*], and they will set it on fire and consume it. There will be no survivors from the house of Esau." The LORD has spoken. (Obadiah 1:18)

They will be entangled among thorns [*chi'il deeníní*] and drunk from their wine; they will be consumed like dry stubble [*ehégod*]. (Nahum 1:10)

The results never end

There are other passages which seem to say that the fire will burn endlessly. What do we do, for example, with passages such as Revelation 14:11 (below)?

And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name." (Revelation 14:11)

What we do is we compare them with other similar passages. The words John uses are in fact not original. They are drawn from Isaiah 34:10, where the subject is the land of Edom, a place God punished more than 2000 years ago. Notice how similar the wording is between Revelation 14:11 and Isaiah 34:10 (below).

It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again. (Isaiah 34:10)

Can these verses teach us about each other? That is the only way I know of to study the Bible. One passage must be allowed to throw light on another, where similar words are used in contexts that bear direct comparison. In this case, what happened to Edom happened in the past, so this is something we can know about. What happens to the wicked at the end of the age is still future, so that is something about which we might still be in doubt. We can't look back to the future and say, Yes, that's what happened. But we can look back to the past and learn from that.

So let us reason from what we know to what we don't know. What happened to Edom long ago? Whatever that was, it's not still happening, because there is no land of Edom now. The ground is still where it was, but now it's called Jordan. So when the Bible says, "It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever" (Isaiah 34:10a), it has to mean that the results are what last forever – not the process that causes them. What results did the fire bring about? The second half of the verse tells us: "From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again" (Isaiah 34:10b). The land was destroyed back then and it remains desolate now.

With this much as background, what could John mean when he borrows the words of Isaiah to describe the destruction of the wicked at the end of the world? Does *that* fire burn on and on forever, or is John saying that after the fire burns uncontrollably its results will last forever?

The words, "And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever" (Revelation 14:11) could be taken to mean that the wicked continue burning through all time and eternity. Many assume this is the right way to understand them. But the words could also be understood to

mean the same thing they meant when Isaiah used them. If we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture, this is how we will have to understand Revelation 14:11. In the context of Isaiah 34:10, John means the fire will burn uncontrollably while it does its work and that, when it is done, its results last through all eternity. The wicked will never come back to life again.

Notice carefully when talking about Revelation 14:11 (and Isaiah 34:10, which says the same thing) that smoke is not fire. It is the result of fire. The result of this particular fire is that the wicked are fully, finally, and completely destroyed forever.

Discussion

Our God is merciful, even when He must be severe. We do not worship a monster, but a loving Father who desires our good. He doesn't shrink from destroying the wicked (some say He's too kind to do that; He will), but the Bible calls this His "strange work," His "alien task."

The LORD will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim, he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon - to do his work, his strange work, and perform his task, his alien task. (Isaiah 28:21)

Always before we have seen God's justice mingled with mercy (see Psalm 85:10), but here we see only justice. When I say "justice," I don't mean injustice. Some people assume that burning people forever for the sins they commit during a short lifetime is justice on a divine scale. Not at all!

You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Selah (Psalm 39:5)

[F]or he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:14)

During the brief moment of our lives, do our sins and mistakes provoke in God a spirit of vengeance so implacable that He burns us and burns us and continues burning us endlessly through all the ceaseless ages of eternity? If this is what we believe, what is our concept of God? Where does that picture of God come from? Not from Scripture.

God will punish the wicked, it is true, but He does this in a way that is right and fair – and merciful. The wicked want to hide from His presence (see Revelation 6:16), but there is nowhere they can go to get away from Him.

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. (Psalm 139:8)

And so God does the only thing that would both satisfy the demands of justice and answer the request of His enemies to be away from His presence. He allows them to cease to be. The way in which they pass from life into death is not pleasant. Fire is painful. But the transition is not the punishment. At least Paul doesn't say it is.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Notice carefully that if the wicked live on forever in flames, this does not mean their punishment never ends. It means their punishment never begins. According to Paul, the wages of sin is death. Death does not begin until life ends. And so the punishment does not begin until these people finally stop living. The fire – which comes down from God (see Revelation 20:9), not up from the depths of the earth – must finish its work before the real punishment of the wicked can begin. And when it does begin, it lasts forever and ever, without end, for all eternity. But we need to understand what the punishment is, and what it's not. The punishment is eternal death. Those who reject God will be burned up and remain dead forever. That is the punishment.

Is this punishment too light? That depends on what you think of Jesus. If being with Jesus in heaven and then on the New Earth (see Revelation 21:1) is the best thing you can imagine, then being dead forever is a crushing punishment. We can only have a true concept of eternal separation from God when we have a true concept of who God is, and who His Son is.

Eternal torment is not the same as eternal death. Eternal dying would actually mean eternal living. But eternal life is not God's punishment for sin; it's the gift He gives to those who love Him. You might say that the one group lives forever in heaven, while the other group lives forever in hell. You might say that, but Paul does not. What he says is, "the wages of sin is death." There is a difference between death and life, and also between death and dying, that we need to surround or we will never understand what Paul is saying in Romans 6:23. The punishment for sin is not eternal life, or eternal dying; it's eternal death. In death no one praises God (see Psalm 115:17), and in death no one suffers.

For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Conclusion

Whatever we believe about these things is going to need to match all the relevant passages of Scripture, not just a handful of them. It is possible to misunderstand any teaching of the Bible, but it is harder to do so when all, or many, of the verses that bear on a given topic are taken into account.