

The Fire that Purifies

Years ago, Edward Fudge wrote a book called, *The Fire that Consumes* in which he defended the annihilationist view that the souls of those in hell will, after due punishment, eventually be destroyed.

In my book *Patristic Universalism*, I have tried to make the case that Scripture seems to suggest that God's fire will purify rather than consume those it touches. Thus the "lake of fire" referred to in Revelation 20:10, 14-15 is meant to purify rather than destroy all *human souls* who are thrown into it. I stress "human souls" for the non-human things such as the devil, death, and Hades that enter the "lake of fire" will be destroyed.

It seems logical to assume that we can gain some insight into how God will treat us in the next life by looking at how He treats us in this life. And when I view how fire is used in Scripture, it is often a way to purify and cleanse the things or people it touches. In Numbers 31:21-23, the soldiers were commanded to purify "*the gold, and the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead*" (NIV) that they obtained from the Midianites by passing it through the fire.

God's word is described as being as pure as metals refined in a furnace. In Psalm 12:6 we read, "*The words of the LORD are pure words; Like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, filtered seven times.*" (NASB). The NET Bible might convey the meaning better. "*The LORD's words are absolutely reliable. They are as untainted as silver purified in a furnace on the ground, where it is thoroughly refined.*" In Proverbs 30:5, we read, "*Every word of God is purified; he is like a shield for those who take refuge in him.*" (NET). The translators of the NET Bible sum up these passages well.

The point is that God's word is trustworthy; it has no defects and flaws, nothing false or - misleading. (*The NET Bible First Edition 2007*, p. 1175 Note 1)

In Scripture, we often read of how God uses the fires of affliction to bring His people to repentance. Egypt, the land where the Israelites suffered for 400 years, is described as an iron furnace (Deut. 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Jer. 11:4) suggesting that God's people were being purified before they were to become a great nation.

We see God using fire to remove sin from Isaiah before he embarked on his prophetic mission.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your guilt is taken away and atonement is made for your sin." (Isa. 6:6-7-NASB)

In Isaiah 48:10, we're told that God refined His people "*in the furnace of affliction.*" (NASB) Again, the fire was not meant to destroy God's people, it was meant to bring them to repentance. This same theme is echoed in Jeremiah 9:7, "*Therefore the LORD who rules over all says, "I will now purify them in the fires of affliction and test them. The wickedness of my dear people has left me no choice. What else can I do?"*" (NET)

John the Baptist speaks of the favorable properties of fire when he stated, "*As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" (Matt. 3:11-NASB).

But in the very next verse, John presents a more frightening view of fire when he says, “*His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*” (Matt. 3:12-NASB) John seems to be teaching (according to the traditional view) that the believers (wheat) will go to heaven with Christ while the non-believers (chaff) will end up in hell. So, what is the Patristic Universalist response to this passage? Those on the traditional side will always view this passage as teaching a clear separation between two distinct groups of people (believers and non-believers). But ‘chaff’ is not distinct from wheat; it’s the husk that surrounds all wheat grains. It’s important to understand that when someone is winnowing wheat, they are *not* removing something that has always been separate from the wheat such as small pebbles or stones, they are removing something that has always been connected to the wheat which is the chaff. In other words, ‘winnowing’ improves the condition of the wheat. This ties in very nicely with the Patristic Universalist view that we are all born as sinners (1 Kings 8:46; Psalm 51:5; Rom. 5:12) and just like wheat, we all come into this world covered in chaff. The ‘winnowing’ John speaks of in Matt. 3:12 is to remove this chaff from the sinner through remedial punishment so that we can enter God’s sinless dwelling.

But some will surely ask, “What about the ‘unquenchable fire’ John speaks of (Matt. 3:12)? Doesn’t that point to eternal punishment?” According to Ramelli and Konstan, the term ‘unquenchable,’ rather than indicating the duration of the fire, can simply mean man’s inability to extinguish it (*Terms for Eternity: Aionios and Aidios in Classical and Christian Texts*, 2013, p. 126). As an example, if my house were engulfed in flames, this fire could certainly be described as ‘unquenchable’ if all I had to fight it with was my garden hose. But this same fire would not be ‘unquenchable’ for the local fire department. In the same way, we cannot extinguish God’s purifying fires but this, of course, does not mean that God won’t put them out when they have served their due purpose.

Some might ask, “But what about Matthew 13:40-42 where Jesus teaches that at the end of the age, the ‘tares’ will be gathered up and thrown into the fire? Unlike the chaff in your previous example, tares are not connected to wheat and yet they are separated and destroyed.” The Patristic Universalist model *does* teach that there will be a separation of people at the end of the age (See also Matt. 13:47-50) where those on the left will be thrown into the eternal fire (Matt. 25:41). But this ‘fire’ has as its purpose to purify and refine the sinner, not to destroy or torture them forever. Notice that in this passage, Jesus says the fire those on the left are being thrown into was “*prepared for the devil and his angels;*” (NASB). In other words, this fire was created to destroy Satan and his minions (i.e., non-human elements). But for human souls, this same fire will simply expose and remove the dross from the sinner leaving them in a purified state where they can then enter heaven’s holy realm. And while it’s true Jesus does say this fire is ‘eternal’, it’s also true that the Greek word translated as ‘eternal,’ according to Marvin Vincent, refers to a period of time that has “a beginning and an end...it does not mean something endless or everlasting.” (Vincent, Marvin, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. IV*, reprinted 2009, p. 58). Vincent is *not* a universalist; he’s a traditional scholar and so his comments on the Greek word *aiōnios* are very interesting.

Given this view of the “eternal fire,” we can now make sense of Matthew 3:10 where Jesus speaks of cutting down the trees that do not bear fruit and throwing them into the fire. Those thrown into the fire will be purified, not destroyed.

1. Let me end this devotional with some information on the earthly benefits of forest fires taken from the California Department of Forestry & Fire Protection
(See <https://www.fire.ca.gov/media/5425/benefitsoffire.pdf>)
2. Removes low-growing underbrush
3. • Cleans the forest floor of debris
4. Opens up the forest to sunlight
5. Nourishes the soil
6. Reduces the elements that compete for nutrients which allows established trees to grow stronger and healthier.

7. Returns health to the forest
8. Cleansing brush from the forest floor with low intensity fires helps to prevent larger, out of control fires
9. Fires clear the forest floor of heavy brush leaving room for new grasses and regenerated shrubs that provide food and habitat for many species
10. When fire removes a thick strand of brush, the water supply is increased because there are fewer plants absorbing the water.
11. Fires kill diseases and insects that prey on trees (More trees die each year from disease and insects than from fires)
12. Fire provides valuable nutrients to the soil
13. Some species of plants are actually fire dependent; they must have fire every 3-25 years in order to continue.
14. Some trees have fire resistant bark and cones that require heat to open them up and release seeds for regeneration.
15. Chaparral plants including Manzanita, chamise, and scrub oak requires intense heat for seed germination.
16. Some plants need fire so much they actually encourage fire by having leaves that are covered with flammable resins.
17. Without fires, some trees would actually succumb to old age with no new generations to carry on their legacy.

David Burnfield <><