



My Bible School Lessons

Exploring the Word of God

Lesson #22: "Eternal Life in Christ"

Would a God of Love Burn Sinners Forever?

How much does God love you? Have you ever tried to measure it? The answer is seen in what He was willing to give in order to save you. His love is so strong that He would have given Jesus to die for you, even if you were the only person on earth who had ever sinned. Such love is more than we can understand.

"But if God is so loving, how can He destroy?" many people have asked. "And this idea of a hell that burns forever and ever, how can you call a God who would do something like that a loving God? Humans are kinder than that to criminals!"

Love and hell just don't seem to fit together. The Bible clearly teaches that there will be a hell fire, and that sinners will be punished there. Yet, it also declares that God is love. How can these teachings be reconciled?

There is an answer. It's found in the pages of Scripture, and our lesson today researches it. First though, let me share with you the testimony of a young girl, Ellen Harmon, as she struggled to understand the mercy and love of God. She longed for assurance of her acceptance with God, but only waves of despair seemed to roll over her soul as she thought of the kind of being He must be. Now, listen to her tell her story.

Feelings of Despair

"I longed above all things to feel that I was entirely accepted of God. But I could not comprehend what was necessary in order to be fully consecrated to God. My Christian friends said to me: 'Believe in Jesus now! Believe that He accepts you now!' This I tried to do, but found it impossible to believe that I had received a blessing which, it seemed to me, should electrify my whole being. I wondered at my hardness of heart in being unable to experience the exaltation of spirit that others manifested. It seemed to me that I was different from them and forever shut out from the perfect joy of holiness of heart.

"I believed that Christ was soon to come, and feared He would find me unprepared to meet Him. Words of condemnation rang in my ears day and night, and my constant cry to God was, 'What shall I do to be saved?'

"In my mind the justice of God eclipsed His mercy and love. I had been taught to believe in an eternally burning hell, and the horrifying thought was ever before me that my sins were too great to be forgiven, and that I should be forever lost. The frightful descriptions that I had heard of souls in perdition sank deep into my mind. Ministers drew vivid pictures of the condition of the lost. They taught that God proposed to save none but the sanctified. The eye of God was upon us always; every sin was registered and would meet its just punishment. God Himself was keeping the books with the exactness of infinite wisdom, and every sin we committed was faithfully recorded against us.

Lesson 22: Eternal Life in Christ

"Satan was represented as eager to seize upon his prey and bear us to the lowest depths of anguish, there to exult over our sufferings in the horrors of an eternally burning hell, where, after the tortures of thousands upon thousands of years, the fiery billows would roll to the surface the writhing victims, who would shriek: 'How long, O Lord, how long?' Then the answer would thunder down the abyss: 'Through all eternity!' Again the molten waves would engulf the lost, carrying them down into the depths of an ever restless sea of fire.

"While listening to these terrible descriptions, my imagination would be so wrought upon that the perspiration would start, and it was difficult to suppress a cry of anguish, for I seemed to already feel the pains of perdition. Then the minister would dwell upon the uncertainty of life. One moment we might be here and the next in hell, or one moment on earth and the next in heaven. Would we choose the lake of fire and the company of demons, or the bliss of heaven with the angels for our companions? Would we hear the voice of wailing and the cursing of lost souls through all eternity, or sing the songs of Jesus before the throne?

"Our heavenly father was presented before my mind as a tyrant, who delighted in the agonies of the condemned; not the tender, pitying Friend of sinners, who loves His creature with a love past all understanding and desires them to be saved in His kingdom.

"My feelings were sensitive. I dreaded giving pain to any living creature. When I saw animals ill-treated, my heart ached for them. I myself had been the victim of thoughtless cruelty, resulting in an injury that darkened my childhood. But when the thought took possession of my mind that God delighted in the torture of His creatures, who were formed in His image, a wall of darkness seemed to separate me from Him. When I reflected that the Creator of the universe would plunge the wicked into hell, there to burn through the ceaseless rounds of eternity, my heart sank with fear, and I despaired that so cruel and tyrannical a being would ever condescend to save me from the doom of sin.

"I thought that the fate of the condemned sinner would be mine, to endure the flames of hell forever, even as long as God Himself existed. This impression deepened upon my mind until I feared that I would lose my reason. I would look upon the dumb beasts with envy, because they had no soul to be punished after death. Many times the wish arose that I had never been born.

"Total darkness settled upon me, and there seemed no way out of the shadows. Could the truth have been presented to me as I now understand it, much perplexity and sorrow would have been spared me. If the love of God had been dwelt upon more, and His stern justice less, the beauty and glory of His character would have inspired me with a deep and earnest love for my Creator.

"I have since thought that many inmates of insane asylums were brought there by experiences similar to my own. their consciences were stricken with a sense of sin, and their trembling faith dared not claim the promised pardon of God. They listened to descriptions of the orthodox hell until it seemed to curdle the very blood in their veins, and burned an impression upon the tablets of their memory. Waking or sleeping, the frightful picture was ever before them, until reality became lost in imagination, and they saw only the wreathing flames of a fabulous hell, and heard only the shrieking of the doomed. Reason became dethroned, and the brain was filled with the wild fantasy of a terrible dream.

"My sufferings of mind were intense. Sometimes for a whole night I would not dare to close my eyes, but would wait until my sister was fast asleep, then quietly leave my bed and kneel upon the floor, praying silently with a dumb agony that cannot be described. The horrors of an eternally burning hell were ever before me. I knew that it was impossible for me to live long in this state, and I dared not die and meet the terrible fate of the sinner

"I frequently remained bowed in prayer nearly all night, groaning and trembling with inexpressible anguish and a hopelessness that passes all description. 'Lord, have mercy!' was my plea,' and, like the poor publican, I dared not lift my eyes to heaven, but bowed my face upon the floor. I kept my sufferings and despair to myself"

Thankfully, this young girl was not left to despair. One night she dreamed of Jesus and saw His face smiling down on her. As she felt the loving eyes of Jesus upon her, her soul was filled with gladness. His presence filled her with a holy reverence and an inexpressible love. She still didn't understand about hell, but she finally came to realize the love that Jesus had for her. The beauty and simplicity of trusting in Him began to dawn upon her troubled soul. How much suffering she could have been spared if she could only have known sooner the loving character of the God who we serve.

How can this loving God be reconciled with the everlasting punishment of the wicked? Perhaps the more pertinent question is, "How can God allow the sin and suffering of this earth go on and on forever?" Would it be fair to allow the innocent to suffer and never mete out justice to the cruel? No. There is a day coming when justice will be carried out. Sin will be punished. But God calls that act a strange act. (See Isaiah 28:21.) He does not rejoice even in the destruction of the sinner. He takes no fiendish delight in the fires of hell. At the end of time, we will understand God's ways more fully. Then, "Every knee shall bow ... and every tongue shall confess . . ." Romans 14:11. All will see that God has been just. All will see that He has been perfectly fair, and that His actions are consistent with love.

The Day that Burns as an Oven

[See Malachi 4:1]

These verses picture a day that for many will be a doomsday, a catastrophe because they are totally unaware and unprepared for it. It reminds me of the story of the city of Pompeii when Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD. For hundreds of years this forgotten city lay buried in ash and lava. No one knew of the terrible drama that had taken place one fateful day in A-D. 79.

Centuries later, at the foot of beautiful Mt. Vesuvius, a new city called Resina sprang up. Vineyards, orchards, and gardens beautified the countryside around the city. No one suspected that just a few feet down lay the buried city whose fate Resina would soon share.

Mt. Vesuvius was a rather deceptive volcano. It would lie quietly for decades and even centuries, never giving any indication of the seething, boiling, raging fire deep within it. Then with very little warning, fire, smoke, thunder, molten lava, and ash would burst from its belly blowing the top off the mountain and devastating the landscape and the towns near it.

Because of the decades that elapsed between eruptions, people forgot that the peaceful looking mountain could be dangerous. To remind them, an interesting memorial tablet has been erected in a nearby city. It reads: "Children and children's children. Hear! I warn you now, after this last catastrophe, that you may not be taken unawares. Sooner or later this mountain takes fire. But before this happens there are mutterings and roaring and earthquakes. Smoke and flames and lightnings are spewed forth, the air trembles and rumbles and howls. Flee so long as you can. For soon the mountain will burst apart and spew out a stream of fire, which will run down and bar the way for those who are slow to flee. If you despise it, if goods and chattels [movable property such as livestock and equipment] are dearer to you than life, it will punish your recklessness and greed. Do not trouble about your hearth and your home, but flee without hesitation. Anno Domini 1632, in the reign of Philip IV. Emmanuele Fonesca, Viceroy."

Lesson 22: Eternal Life in Christ

It reminds me of the warning given to Lot and his family by the angel as they were literally dragged out of Sodom. "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain. Escape to the mountains lest you be destroyed. Then the Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens. Genesis 19:17,24.

After Resina was destroyed by the volcano in 1631, the work of reconstructing not only the city but the irrigation system for the outlying vineyards and gardens began. As they dug they began finding ancient Roman coins. Other objects were found including a set of ancient keys. No one paid much attention until 1709 when a valuable collection of marble and alabaster was found. Eventually enough evidence was discovered to cause them to begin serious excavation. Centuries after its destruction, the story of Pompeii lay preserved--petrified--just as it was the day the volcano halted its life.

Today you can walk down the excavated streets of ancient Pompeii. The airless blanket of ash preserved things just as they were. The numbers on the houses and even some of the names of the people who lived there are still visible. Though the victims' bodies quickly decomposed, perfect imprints were left in the hard packed ash. These molds have been filled with plaster giving a very realistic view of what happened.

It was obviously a very prosperous town. The well preserved mosaics, paintings, statues and other works of art with their still brilliant colors have captivated the attention of the world. But through it all can be seen the vulgarity of its occupants. Even visiting aristocracy of the day were horrified.

Dotting the city were 118 bars and taverns. Gambling houses were plentiful. Graffiti on the walls revealed the immorality of the people. Carved images revealed, sometimes grotesquely, that worshiping the gods and goddesses of fertility was their most important religious practice.

Since Pompeii is not far from Rome you can't help but wonder how many times Paul and his associates had given the Gospel and the call to repentance to these people steeped in sin. They lived for the gods of this world and the lusts of the flesh. They didn't know when they rejected their last hope of mercy.

In mid-August, 79 AD, the volcano began to rumble and roar. The warning was given that it looked as though the volcano was about ready to blow up. Many of the people fled for safety. Then things quieted down just a little, so the people came back a bit sheepishly. As they quietly stole back into the city only 13 miles from Mt. Vesuvius, they again took up the activities and wild pleasures of life. Gambling, dancing, liquor, theater with gladiators, and all kinds of immorality went on as if nothing was happening. Little did they realize that the hour of their last night on earth was upon them.

On the morning of August 24, a violent quake shook the countryside. An earsplitting clap of thunder was heard. People rushed into the streets as the summit of Vesuvius split and flames shot skyward at an incredible speed and filled the sky. Showers of hot thick ashes and burning stones rained down on them. Broad sheets of fire and leaping flames blazed down the mountain toward them.

People fled in terror but there was nowhere to go. Like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah that scoffed at Lot's warnings, they had waited too long. They had ignored too many warnings. It was like a foretaste of the day when,

"But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. 10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." 2 Peter 3:7,10

The morning that life ended in Pompeii, the people were obviously going about life as usual. Blackened loaves of bread still sit in a sealed oven waiting for the baker to remove them. A fully prepared breakfast

Lesson 22: Eternal Life in Christ

waits vainly for the family to sit down and dine. Instead, all life came to a sudden end as a river of hot lava, poisonous air, and burning ash covered them. There they are, petrified in a hot and burning death.

One young woman had evidently fled inside to gather her most sacred treasures when the volcano blew up that fateful night. She was fleeing from her home but fell across her own doorstep. Nineteen hundred years later her petrified body was found. In her stony hands she was still clutching something. What was it that stood out uppermost in her mind—the one thing that she must save? They found in each hand a pearl earring! Perhaps she could have escaped when her last moment on earth came to her, but no, she must have her precious pearl earrings! How valueless, how trifling, in comparison to life!

A man is seen encased in stone. His arms are wrapped tightly around a metal box. When they pried it open, they found it was a treasure chest. In it were gold coins, silver, precious stones, and diamonds. How sad to be trapped in a lake of hot lava for the trinkets of this life. Riches mean absolutely nothing when at the hour of death, we stand face to face with eternity.

It is a reminder to our world of the last days. The treasures and pleasures of this life will hold the attention of many until it is too late. Oh friend, how important it is to make sure that *you* are not one of those that neglects salvation until it is too late to escape. (Hebrews 2:3)

Is there anything in your life that is more important to you than this? Can you hear the voice of Jesus still speaking down through the ages to you personally? "Take heed.... lest *your* hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and the cares of this life, and that Day come on *you* unexpectedly. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape." Be sure that *you* are not content with a false hope like the five foolish virgins of Matthew 25. "Strive to enter through the narrow gate for many ... will seek to enter and will not be able. Again, He pleads with you, "Be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh." It is not a matter to be trifled with. It means everything.