

HELL IS NOT GOD'S PUNISHMENT

by Rev. Donald L. Rose

Pope John Paul II and other spiritual leaders of our times have been offering new perspectives on the subject of hell. According to a recent poll among those who believe in hell 53% understand hell to be an anguished state of existence separated from God. A respectable 34% still believe that hell is a place where people suffer torments in fire.

With respect for those who understand differently I offer thoughts from my religious perspective. I believe that hell is real. I do not believe that God is ever angry or that He takes revenge or punishes people. Let's take the example of literal physical fire. The theologian Emanuel Swedenborg from whom I take my religious tradition uses this as an example. If you put your hand in fire you will feel consequences. But the fire is not to blame, and neither is God to blame.

The same is true of spiritual fire, the evil passions of hate, lust and selfishness. I will discuss hell fire in a moment, but I want to talk about the punishment-and-reward model of life. This simple model has definite value. If you do wrong, you will get pain for it later. If you do right, you await future reward. We tell our children that, and it prepares them for life in society. There are beautiful literal statements in the Bible that resonate with that model. But there is something deeper behind them.

Suppose I do good deeds and play by the rules or profess certain beliefs for a number of years. Will I get a reward in the hereafter of everlasting bliss? And if I act or believe wrongly, will I be repaid with everlasting torment? One of the valuable secrets of life is that goodness is its own reward, and that evil is its own punishment. The 19th Psalm speaks of the precepts of God and says that "in keeping them there is great reward."

In the Gospels we find phrases like "great is your reward in heaven," and interestingly it is said that we should do right "hoping for nothing." And then it is added, "your reward shall be great" (Luke 6:35). Acting in a loving way has within it great reward. According to Swedenborg one of the greatest joys we can know is the joy in doing good without any hope of reward for ourselves. That joy is typical of heavenly life.

One who chooses a selfish life is already miserable even if not conscious of the misery (see Revelation 3 verse 17). If one persists in such choice after death, there is a self-centered life, and it is hell. Swedenborg says emphatically that there is no one literally "burning" in hell fire. Theologians today are saying that the fire is symbolic. While agreeing with that, I differ from those who say that hell is "separation from God." Yes, those in hell choose to turn away from the acknowledgement of God and the kind of life He offers. But it is impossible to be separated from God. The Psalm says that if we go to heaven God is there, and if we make our bed in hell, behold God is there! (139:8). God's love and mercy are still with us, even if we choose the foolishness of hell.

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