

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Genesis 19:24, ESV.

24 Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven.

Pastor Joe's Fire and Brimstone.

There is a lot of material in the Bible that seemingly portrays God as violent, vengeful, even cruel. In Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges, we read about God directing the Chosen People to invade Canaan and slaughter the residents and take their land – the excuse is that the Canaanites are pagans who live decadent lives and practice such rituals as child sacrifice. We have discussed the fact that there is strong archeological, scientific, and literary evidence that the slaughter never happened. Ultimately, the Canaanite massacre might be a faith story, one meant to graphically visualize the fulfillment of God's promise of a homeland, the dependability of God, and the determination of God to honor those who live by his ways. Many scholars now believe that the Israelites emerged out of the Canaanite population with minimal violence. There is the story of Noah and how God drowned almost all living things on Earth because of the sins of people. But in truth, there are even older stories of great floods, like the one told in the

Mesopotamian tale *Gilgamesh*, suggesting that the Hebrew story isn't original.

Many believe that there was at most a local flood in the Holy Land that was indeed very destructive, but the magnitude of the flood grew as the oral biblical story was retold over the centuries before it was written down. In sum, we've come to recognize that many of the stories in the Old Testament are allegories and faith stories, tales told from the perspective of a people struggling to survive in a world surrounded by peoples who constantly attacked them. They needed a brutal God who would stand up to their enemies and defend their morals. In conclusion, we understand that the gore in the Old Testament must be read in its proper context and not read as if it were a modern document.

But what about the New Testament? Jesus was all about peace, and forgiveness, empathy, and nonviolence. But there are troubling things in the New Testament. Let's consider a theme concerning God's willingness to punish that runs through the Greek Scriptures. I've chosen two passages that are representative. The first is from the Gospel of Matthew, and these are the words of Jesus himself, proclaiming that when the End Times come, there will be people who will suffer for eternity. The second passage is from the 2nd letter to the Thessalonians, and it too, describes in very graphic terms the fate that the sinful

shall face on judgement day. But is God really that vengeful? Here is Matthew 25:31–46, from the ESV, with significant editing for brevity:

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, before him will be all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Jesus is saying that if you come by a hungry person and don't feed them, or who needs clothes and don't give them to that person, you will suffer the eternal punishment. These are sins of omission, of missed opportunities, not proactive, violent acts. Do you deserve this sort of punishment because you never visited someone in prison? Should we really “*go away into eternal punishment*”? We'll look at 2 Thessalonians for another view of God's retribution.

First, though, I'd like to talk about a sermon I once heard that I think was very wrong, theologically. I'm not going to tell you the church I was at or what

year it was, but it was a mainstream Christian church in this area. The pastor, we'll call him Joe, was delivering an old school message, one that I heard many times as a child. I believe that this misinterpretation of Scripture is one of the key reasons why so many people have turned away from Christ. Here is how that sermon went. The pastor of this church was very animated. He pointed at the members of the congregation. He shouted. He was an older man, but not elderly. He was very serious looking. He said, or rather he yelled, that the fact that so many people were leaving the Church meant that there would be standing room only among the goats on the left side of Jesus on judgement day. With fire in his eyes, he warned the congregation that many of their loved ones, their siblings, even their adult children, would not be spending eternity in Heaven, that they would be condemned to the fires of Hell for not knowing God, for not believing in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and for not taking care of people who have nothing. He seemed to be drawing from both our Matthew and our 2 Thessalonians passages. The thrust of his sermon was that simply by not having faith, by not belonging to a church, by not living selfless lives that mimic the life of Jesus, people would be condemned to eternal suffering. He didn't say anything about these people being murderers or armed robbers or drug dealers or arsonists or doing anything else that we would recognize as being inherently

deeply evil. He added the caveat is that if we think we're saved by faith, well, if we haven't done the things that Jesus demands, then our faith is false and will let us down. When he was done with his sermon, everyone was hushed, and people left the church silently. I will return to Pastor Joe.

It was a bit extreme of a sermon, but it was representative of what many Christians have been taught over the centuries and over recent decades. The idea is that it's hard to earn the gift of living in God's Kingdom for eternity. We need to live in an almost paranoid state, worried about whether what we're doing today will put us in the positive or the negative when it comes to salvation points.

Back to our passages. We start with Matthew, the Gospel written by a Jew mostly for Jews who were following the teachings of Jesus Christ. The passage comes from a series of three parables that concern the great apocalypse. This sequence, while it seems violent and reactionary, is quite representative of the teachings of Jesus. Jesus says in clear and blunt language that a Christian isn't simply a pious person who does no overt wrong. A Christian is supposed to do what Jesus did, and that is value the lowest in society as if they were the highest among people. But here is the important part: Giving food and water to someone in need, or giving them clothing, or visiting someone in prison aren't meant to be

taken as a literal check list of things we must do in our lifetimes. They are representative of the sorts of behaviors that should drive our lives. Jesus is saying that we should avoid the corruption and selfishness that was prevalent among the wealthy and powerful of his day – and I believe is more prevalent today. This passage isn't meant to scare people. Its purpose is to lay out in clear terms how simple it is to lead a Christ-like life. Be a good person and be proactive about it. Do what you know is right when you encounter someone who is suffering.

Here is another passage, from 2 Thessalonians, 1:7–12, from the ESV:

when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.¹¹ To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power,¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Note that Jesus arrives

⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Not knowing God and not obeying the Gospel isn't a good thing, of course, but it's not like these folks are mass murderers – yet they are caught up in *flaming fire*!

Why the powerful language about God's vengeance? This language is more complex and much harder to read than that of Matthew. This is Paul, writing to the people of Thessalonica. As it turns out, scholars believe that the 1st letter to the Thessalonians was indeed written by Paul, but that he didn't personally write 2 Thessalonians. But the letter embodies proper – and compassionate - Christian doctrine, and it was probably written by a follower of Paul. Paul – or someone else – wrote this letter in response to the persecution of Christians in Thessalonica; this was causing them to doubt their faith. He's trying to dispel a wrong teaching that has spread among these followers of Christ. This twisted teaching is that judgement day has already come and gone, so there is no longer any need to worry about what you do in life. Some of these people had even stopped working for a living. The overall context is this: The true believers in Thessalonica are being tormented by non-believers. The followers of Christ are therefore suffering. Paul wants them to know that yes, things are bad now, but they will receive a great reward in the end. They are to understand that their tormentors will face ruin and pain for what they have done. Yes, in part, the writer of the letter is trying to make sure that the believers in Thessalonica live the way Christ wants them to. But the author's main purpose isn't to tell them that hey, you people there in the church in Thessalonica, you're going to burn in

Hell if you don't clean up your act. The author is saying that God will one day *"grant relief to you who are afflicted"*. The author is saying that he, Paul, is quite sure that God will indeed find them worthy. It's actually a reassuring message, not a threat of eternal violence for those believers who stray.

Let's get back to the wild-eyed pastor who leveled his index finger at his congregation and yelled, warning them that they needed to follow the example of Jesus Christ in their lives or they would be condemned to Hell. He was delivering the traditional warning sermon, where the preacher tells people that while they are alive, while there is still time to do something about it, that many of them are not destined for eternity in the Kingdom of God. In an old school way, this sort of sermon is meant to be helpful, to give people the chance to clean up their act, kind of like a parole officer telling his parolee in no uncertain terms that he had better not go back to his old life of selling drugs and hanging out with convicts.

But Pastor Joe made some more mistakes. Have you ever wondered where the term *"fire and brimstone"* comes from. Here is Genesis 19:24 from the ESV:

²⁴ Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven.

We see the word *"sulfur"* in this verse. An older term for sulfur is brimstone.

Here is the same verse from the King James Bible:

²⁴ Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven.

God destroys Sodom because of the extreme immorality practiced by its inhabitants. Pastor Joe was delivering the traditional “fire and brimstone” sermon. But like so many pastors before him, he forgot one thing. It is God raining sulfur and fire down on Sodom, not Pastor Joe.

Here are verses 11 and 12 of Chapter 4 of James:

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

The author might be the brother of Jesus. He’s telling us that we do not judge others. God does this. It’s a lesson that Pastor Joe needs to learn.

But there is a bit more that Pastor Joe had wrong. Consider our passage from 2 Thessalonians again. Let’s look at the punishment that evil people will face:

⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,

This eternal suffering is a separation from God. God punishes truly evil people with a sort of spiritual time-out, where they must sit in their rooms alone, separated from God – forever. God does not punish with fire and brimstone.

God is not cruel or bitter. God doesn't fall prey to the negative emotions that we have to battle against. God doesn't do the human thing of deflecting his own pain by making others suffer. God is just, loving, and genuinely wants the best for us, in both our physical and our spiritual lives. The notion that God created us to have someone to love runs through both the Old and the New Testaments. Ezekiel was a prophet who told the people of Israel that they had to accept the depth of their sins. But he also told them that God wants all people to enter his kingdom and live in joy. Here is the prophet, speaking for God:

²³ Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?

Finally, we don't need God demanding that we carry out some huge to-do list of selfless tasks to earn a place in his kingdom. We are motivated internally, for a purely selfish reason to take advantage of any opportunity to help other people. We feel a strong internal reward, a deep sense of purpose, when we help someone in need. God made us this way. Remember our Sages, the folks who understood the joy of living lives of kindness. I will finish Proverb 11:25:

²⁵ A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.