Please explain Jesus' sayings in Mark 9:43-48.

This particular passage has caused great confusion for many readers, and has prompted some Christians to adopt wrong and unbiblical teachings.

This is what Jesus said in Mark 9:43-48:

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire--where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.'"

This passage raises numerous areas, requiring clarification:

(1) What "life" is Christ referring to?
(2) Are we to literally cut off our hands and feet and pluck out our eyes when they "cause" us to sin?
(3) What is the fire that shall never be quenched?; and
(4) Why do their worms not die?

Let's review these questions one at a time.

(1) "Enter into Life"

Christ is referring here to ETERNAL life, equating it in Mark 9:47 with entering the KINGDOM OF GOD. We find similar phraseology in Matthew 19:16-30. There, a rich man asked Christ how to enter "ETERNAL life" (Matthew 19:16). Christ answered in verse 17: "... if you want to enter into LIFE [obviously referring to ETERNAL life--that was the question of the rich man], keep the commandments."

When the rich man revealed his unwillingness to keep ALL of God's commandments, including the one against idolatry, Christ said, "... it is hard for a rich man to enter the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN" (verse 23), identifying it later as the KINGDOM OF GOD (verse 24). And finally, in verse 29, He emphasized that He was speaking of inheriting ETERNAL LIFE. He showed thereby that "entering into life" means, inheriting ETERNAL life in the Kingdom of God.

What did He mean, when He said that we should cut off our hands and feet and pluck out our eyes, if they cause us to sin, and that it is better to enter into life maimed, lame and blind, than to "go to hell"?

(2) Cut Off Your Hand and Feet and Pluck Out Your Eye

We have to state very emphatically that Christ did NOT mean this in a literal way. If it were to be understood literally, then no Christian would enter life with two feet, two eyes or two hands, as ALL Christians have sinned and still sin, and not only once (compare Romans 7:15-16, 24; 1 John 1:8-10). We should also note that sin originates in the mind (James 1:14-15). Even a maimed, lame or blind person can and does still sin. The Lamsa Bible explains that the expressions "plucking out your right eye" and "cutting off your right hand" (compare Matthew 5:29, 30) are Aramaic idioms, meaning "stop envying" [with your eyes] and "stop stealing" [with your hands]. [Likewise, the Lamsa Bible explains that the phrase "turn your cheek," as used in Matthew 5:39, is another Aramaic idiom, meaning, "Do not start a quarrel or a fight."]

The Nelson Study Bible adds: "Cut it off should be taken figuratively; it means to take whatever drastic action is necessary to avoid sin."

The Broadman Bible Commentary points out: "... if what you desire to do, or the places you long to frequent, or the things you are greedy to possess... would entice you into a path departing from the way [of life]... whatever sacrifice is necessary must be made. This is no command for mutilation of the body. But there cannot be two masters in life; either you 'deny yourself' and accept a new master ('follow me') or you lose your [eternal] life."

What Christ was referring to was the need to cease using our members in the practice of sinful conduct. For example, He warns His disciples not to look at a married woman with evil thoughts, as this constitutes adultery in the eyes of God. Coveting our neighbor's possessions already constitutes using our hands in committing theft in the eyes of God, and hating our fellow man already constitutes murder in God's eyes--using our feet to walk on an evil path. We read in Colossians 3:5, 8, that we have to put to death our "members," which are then described as including fornication, evil desire, covetousness, anger, malice and lying. Paul says in Romans 6:13, not to "present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but... as instruments of righteousness to God."

James warns us that our tongue is a little member which must be controlled (James 3:5), lest it causes irreparable harm. And finally, he states in James 4:1 that "wars and fights come from... your desires for pleasure that war in your members."

Jesus was using certain members of our bodies (foot, hand and eye) to illustrate the principle that a Christian must strive to eradicate sin in his life--even if it means, breaking a sinful HABIT which may be as painful to overcome as perhaps losing a foot, a hand or an eye. But Christ said it is better to forgo the passing pleasures of sin (compare Hebrews 11:25)--even if it "hurts"--than to be cast into hell fire.

What did Christ mean when He talked about "hell fire that shall never be quenched"?

(3) Unquenchable Hell Fire

The Greek for "hell" in the phrase "hell fire" is "Gehenna." Gehenna, which designates the valley of Hinnom, is located outside Jerusalem. Trash, animal carcasses and even the dead bodies of criminals were thrown into that fire to be burned up. Jesus applied the concept of that Gehenna fire to the fire awaiting the wicked to destroy them. That fire is referred to in many places as the "lake of fire" or the second or final death (compare Revelation 20:14). The wicked will be thrown into that "hell fire" to be burned up and destroyed--they will not be tortured for ever and ever. The act of their extinction will occur with sudden finality, and the wicked will quickly perish with only a brief comprehension of their empty fate!

The Nelson Study Bible states: "The imagery of hell (frequently called gehenna) comes from a garbage dump outside the walls of Jerusalem. Jesus' hearers were familiar with the smoldering fires that always burned there."

For further information on the concept of "hell" or "Gehenna," please read our free booklets, "Do You Have an Immortal Soul?" and "God's Commanded Holy Days," as well as our Update #194, "Do the Wicked Go to Hell?", Update #195, "Revelation 14:11"; and Update #196, "Revelation 20:11."

But why did Christ say that the fire would not be quenched? Does this "hell fire" burn forever?

Note that Jesus does not say that the fire will burn forever, and that it will never go out. He said that it would not and could not be "quenched"--that is, nobody would (be able to) put it out as long as there was fuel to keep it burning. Once there is no more fuel, it will cease to burn.

The same terminology is used throughout the Bible for fire--or God's wrath burning like a fire--but this does not mean that that fire or the wrath of God will burn forever. It burns as long as there is reason or "fuel" to burn. Note Jeremiah 4:4: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, And take away the foreskins of your hearts, You men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Lest My fury come forth like fire, And burn so that no one can quench it, Because of the evil of your doings." Compare, too, Jeremiah 21:12 and Amos 5:6.

But we also read that God's wrath, even though no one can quench it, will not "burn" forever. Psalm 30:5 says: "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life." And Micah 7:18 adds: "He does NOT retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy."

God uses the same terminology of "unquenchable fire" for the ancient destruction of Jerusalem at the time of Jeremiah. We read God's words in Jeremiah 17:27: "But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched."

We read that this prophecy came to pass in the days of King Zedekiah of Judah, when King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, destroyed Jerusalem under his captain Nebuzaradan. We read in 2 Kings 25:9 that he "burned the house of the LORD and the king's house; all the houses of Jerusalem, that is, all the houses of the great, he burned with fire."

But that fire is not burning any more today. Jerusalem was rebuilt. It existed at the time of Jesus. The fire was never quenched, that is, deliberately put out, but it went out on its own when there was no longer any fuel to keep it burning.

The same is true for the Gehenna fire--the lake of fire. We read that it will ultimately engulf and burn up the surface of the entire earth--we are told that "both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10). In fact, even the "heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat" (verse 12). But after that, God will create "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (verse 13). At that time, there will be no more burning lake of fire, because nothing will exist anymore which needs to be burned. Revelation 21:4 tells us that at that time, there will be "no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain."

For more information on the new heavens and the new earth, please read our free booklet, "Angels, Demons and the Spirit World."

The Gehenna fire will apparently be burning throughout the time of the Millennium, the Great White Throne Judgment and the Third and Final Resurrection to "damnation" or "the final destruction" of the wicked. Why does Jesus say that during that time, the worms of the wicked will not die?

(4) Their Worms Won't Die

Again, Christ uses language pertaining to the fire of Hinnom, which was burning outside Jerusalem, to illustrate a point. When some animal or body of dead criminals caught on the ledges below the rim, it would be devoured by "worms" or maggots. However, the maggots would not live forever--they would develop into flies. Those flies would deposit new eggs, and maggots would hatch from these eggs, eat the flesh, continue in the larval form for a few days, go through a metamorphosis and emerge as flies. Nothing would exterminate the maggots--as nothing or no one would extinguish or quench the fire. But without fuel to burn or without flies to deposit new eggs, the fire would go out and maggots would cease to develop. Technically, Christ's point is well taken, as maggots in fact did not die--they developed into flies--which would ultimately die. But His spiritual application is much more telling: The fate of the unrepentant wicked is inescapable. As no one quenched the fire or prevented maggots from developing into flies, so no one can change the fate of the unrepentant sinner.

Jesus quoted from a future prophecy in Isaiah 66:24, which says: "And they shall go forth and look Upon the CORPSES of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, And their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." Please note that the "worms" or maggots are those developing on the corpses of dead people--they are NOT the dead people themselves.

The Broadman Bible Commentary agrees, stating as follows: "Hell with its unquenchable fire is 'Gehenna'... Gehenna historically was a valley at

the western edge of Jerusalem. Used at one time by worshippers of Molech as a place where their sons or daughters were offered in sacrifice, the valley was defiled during King Josiah's religious reformation... Since that time it had been used as a dump for all kinds of refuse. Therefore it was correctly described as a place where maggots continually fed and multiplied ('their worm does not die') and where fire was always smoldering ('the fire is not quenched.')."

In conclusion, Christ's statement in Mark 9:43-48 is a warning to all of us. He cautions us to be very careful about how we live--and to break any sinful habits which we might have--even if that process hurts and is painful. If we are neglectful in our efforts to overcome sin, we might end up in the lake of fire. We are told in Hebrews 2:1-3: "Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we NEGLECT so great a salvation." Again, we read in Hebrews 4:11: "Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience." And finally, note this warning in Hebrews 10:26-27: "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and FIERY indignation which will DEVOUR the adversaries."

Therefore, as we are admonished to do, "... be even more diligent to make your call and election SURE... for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the EVERLASTING KINGDOM of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10-11).

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