

A man once had a very disturbing dream. He dreamed that he had approached the gates of heaven and was stopped by St. Peter. It was determined from the Book of Life that he was not deserving of entrance and St. Peter directed him to a growing multitude of souls nearby. As the man came close to this group, he could hear heart-rending wailing and moaning sounds. It was a very violent and hostile crowd. Everyone was looking at everyone else with a mixture of fear and distrust. The man was shaken to the core of his being by this picture and he returned to St. Peter and began to plead, saying, "What kind of God would torture and punish people like this? Those people are evil. They are trying to devour each other there! I cannot possibly spend an eternity with them!"

Then St. Peter said to him, "There is no torture involved here. God is a God of love. But you have chosen not to follow His way. You have rejected Him and his Goodness, and so you are left behind with all of the others who have done the same." The man awoke, relieved that this had not really happened to him. He also realized that simply being without God for an eternity is the worst possible hell imaginable. There need be no fire and brimstone to bring about the wailing and gnashing of teeth.

We really don't understand what God's punishment is all about. God wants all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3,4). He does not enjoy punishing us. That is not what His law is for. Dorothy Sayers points out that there is a difference between saying, 'if you hold your finger in the fire you will get burned' and saying, 'if you whistle at your work I shall beat you, because the noise gets on my nerves.' Which does the law of God really mean? God knows how the machine of man's soul works and knows what gives it pain. He has tried to tell us how to live so that we can have the best life possible (John 10:10). If we choose not to be a part of his kingdom, then we will be excluded from the glory of heaven.

Several of the parables of Jesus concern those who were excluded from the kingdom of heaven. The rich man was excluded, the foolish virgins were excluded, and those represented by the tares were excluded. When I think about eternity I think about whether I want to be with the worst people that I know or the best people I know. It also makes me think that if we go around in life thinking the best about the people around us, then we will be prepared for the relationships that we will have in heaven. If we are always thinking the worst of people, then we will not know how to live there. As Paul says in Phillipians 4:8, "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things." This is how we should think about others.

We can live forever with God and His Goodness, or we can live for ever separated from all Goodness. The choice is obvious to me. We want to be sure that we are not excluded; we must embrace the will of God in our hearts and make every effort to reflect His Goodness in our own lives.