

# THE REALITY OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

Geoffrey R. Kirkland  
Christ Fellowship Bible Church

Matthew 3:12 — “His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

From this text, the Word of God speaks of the reality of eternal punishment. We can study it under a few headings:

## 1. WHO - Jesus Christ: “HE”

John the Baptist is around the Jordan River baptizing many people who are coming to him from the nearby areas and when the religious leaders arrived, he warned them to flee from the wrath to come (Matt 3:7). He warned these Pharisees and Sadducees that he baptizes with water for repentance, but Christ Himself is coming who is mightier and He baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matt 3:11). Jesus Christ has a winnowing fork in His hand and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor and He will gather His wheat (=believers) into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff (=unbelievers) with unquenchable fire. This tells us that judgment will be decisively and justly administered by Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus would later declare that the Father has given all judgment to the Son (John 5:22) and it is Christ Himself who sits on a Great, White Throne at the end of the age and He will cast all nonbelievers into the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:11-15). Make no mistake, it is Jesus Christ the Sovereign Lord, who judges nonbelievers.

## 2. CERTAINTY - He WILL

In the message in the open air to the very religious masses, John declared that Jesus *will* gather His wheat into His barn and He *will* burn up the chaff (Matt 3:12). There is an element of certainty here. No doubt exists. No uncertainty or potentiality is in the text. Christ Himself *will* cast all the chaff away. For all nonbelievers, no matter how rebellious, indifferent, oppressive, or religious they have been, Christ Jesus *will most surely* cast all unrepentant sinners and Christ-rejecting rebels to hell.

## 3. VIOLENCE - “burn up”

Sometimes John the Baptist is called a “hell, fire and brimstone preacher.” To be fair, he’s a faithful prophet who delivers what God has for the hearers. In the public, John courageously and unflinchingly declares that Jesus will burn up the chaff. He will burn them up. The language Matthew uses is that Jesus will consume them up, burn them entirely, utterly destroy them violently. Later, in Jesus’ public teaching before many crowds, he will say: “Gather the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up” (Matt 13:30). All unrepentant sinners who do not come to Christ alone for salvation will be burned up. It also must be mentioned that Christ Himself *will burn up* the chaff. Christ actively and righteously exacts perfect judgment in the burning of all sinners who die apart from Him.

## 4. RECIPIENTS - the chaff

The faithful preaching of the forerunner to the Messiah also includes the description of those who will be judged. He calls them “chaff.” Chaff speaks of that which is worthless, nothing, unhelpful, light, useless. John says that the Lord Christ will burn up all nonbelievers -- and he calls them chaff. The Bible likens the wicked to chaff (Ps 1:4) who blow away in a wind. It is the Angel of the LORD who drives the chaff away (Ps 35:5). God, in His almighty and unstoppable power, makes all the wicked like chaff which are driven away (Ps 83:13). So here, John graphically and honestly speaks of nonbelievers as “chaff” -- that which is useless and unprofitable.

#### **5. ETERNALITY / SEVERITY - with unquenchable fire**

Far different than a common mantra of everyone going to heaven, or no one going to hell, John the Baptist taught that all the chaff would be burned up with “unquenchable fire.” All nonbelievers will go to the place of eternal fire (Matt 18:8). At the end of the age, Christ will judge those and say: “Depart from me...into the eternal fire” (Matt 25:41). False teachers will make their eternal home in the “eternal fire” (Jude 7). Not only does John speak of fire, but the fire is unquenchable. That signifies the enduring nature, the endlessness, the never-ending everlastingness of this fiery judgment of God that will crush all nonbelievers. It’s unquenchable, it never goes out, it never fades, it never loses its power, it never goes out, it never rests. Sinners who do not repent of sin will go into hell, into the unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43).

With the reality of eternal punishment clearly set forth in Scripture, note the hope for those who turn to Christ Jesus by faith alone. John the Baptist says that Christ Himself will “gather His wheat into the barn.” This picture provides such a personal, protective, caring love of the Savior who gathers His people, whom He has purchased with His own blood, into the barn. Think of the usefulness, the benefit, the blessing of wheat. Think of a barn and the protection it offers from bad weather, from invaders, and from harm. Christ is the only refuge and the only hope for sinners. No other way to escape eternal punishment exists. Turn to Christ and live! Repent and believe the gospel! Come to Christ and find life!