

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

^{ESV} *Psalm 103:8-10*

In early February 2015, Americans watched in horror a recorded video of a captured Jordanian pilot who was placed in a cage by Islamic state militants and then burned alive with gasoline. Condemnation and the promise of retribution was quick to follow as politicians, media pundits, and even religious leaders decried the wretchedness of anyone who would do such a brutal and disgusting thing – Then the following Sunday, many of those same people went to church praising a God who they believe is going to burn His enemies alive forever and ever.

Many, if not the majority of Christians believe in an ever-burning hell – a place where those who are not “saved” will spend eternity engulfed in flames, never being allowed to die so as to escape the horrendous pain.

How does it feel to be burned alive? Obviously, none of us have ever experienced it, but if you want to get a hint, just light a match and see if you can hold one of your fingers a half inch over it for 5 seconds, then imagine your entire body being engulfed in those same flames forever.

Many – both Christian and Jew – believe that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - the God they say is full of mercy and compassion - plans to sentence those who don't believe and follow Him to that type of torture forever and ever. And since He is willing to condemn people to that fate, it's not surprising that they also believe that - under certain circumstances, He instructs His people to condemn their own countrymen to a similar, though not eternal fate as well.

In this study, we are not going to deal with the ever-burning hell theory. It has been disputed over and over again, and if you are interested, you can find my take on it on our website. Instead, I want to discuss cases in scripture where God appears to be telling His people to “burn” a person who violates certain Torah instructions. Those cases include:

- a woman and her daughter who marry the same man (Lev. 20:14)
- the daughter of a priest who ‘plays the whore’ (Lev. 21:9)
- Achan and the accursed thing (Josh.7:15)

As we study these scriptures and others that have a bearing on them, we might also discover principles that might alter our view on the ‘ever-burning hell’ concept as well.

Let's begin by studying the two sins in the Torah that appear to indicate the punishment of burning.

Relations with a Woman and Her Mother

According to the Torah, there are two specific sins for which the penalty of being burned is prescribed. They are both listed in the context of “sexual” sins. The first is the case of a man who has a sexual relationship with a woman and her mother.



^{ESV} **Leviticus 20:14** If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is depravity; he and they shall be burned with fire, that there may be no depravity among you.

The scripture defines this type of relationship as wickedness (KJV), depravity (ESV), and iniquity (LXX) and it states that “he and they” (all three) shall be “burned with fire” so that this type of wickedness would not be in the camp. So what is the manner of wickedness? The Hebrew word that is used is “zimmah” (זִמָּה – 2154) and it means “an evil plan”. It comes from the root word “zaman” (זָמַן – 2161) that means “to have a thought, a plan, or a purpose”. So the relationship – whatever it was - was a means to an end, and the intended result was apparently not beneficial to the Hebrew community.

There is a parallel to this passage in Leviticus that sheds more light on what is being spoken –

^{ESV} **Leviticus 18:17** You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are relatives; it is depravity.

Here again we see the relationship of a man taking a woman and her daughter, but it also includes the prohibition of taking a woman and her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter, i.e. – her grandchildren.

Note that the reason given was because they are her near kin.¹ “sha'arah” (שְׂאֵרָה – 7608) which comes from root word “she'er” (שָׂרָה - 7607) a word that means “what remains”

What is interesting is that there are many passages in Leviticus 18 that speak of prohibited relationships because of them being to near kin. What's more, these prohibitions follow on the heels of YHVH telling Moses –

^{ESV} **Leviticus 18:3-5** You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes.⁴ You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the LORD your God.⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

So apparently as part of a pagan culture, it was common, or even required to enter into these incestuous relationships; and as God closes this series of sexual sins, He says –

^{ESV} **Leviticus 18:24-30**²⁴ "Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean,²⁵ and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.²⁶ But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you²⁷ (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean),²⁸ lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.²⁹ For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people.³⁰ So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: I am the LORD your God."

Though we do not know the purpose behind or the outcome of these various types of sexual deviancy, we do know that they were part of both the Egyptian and the Canaanite culture, and the penalty given for practicing any of them is to be cut off from the people, which in many cases means death.

¹ “sha'arah” (שְׂאֵרָה – 7608) which comes from root word “she'er” (שָׂרָה - 7607) which means “what remains”



Before leaving this passage, I want to note that between the commandment to not commit adultery with your neighbor's wife (verse 20) and the commandment to not practice homosexuality (verse 22), God gives this commandment –

^{ESV} **Leviticus 18:21** You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

We'll discuss this passage more a little later, but let's now move on to the case of the priests daughter.

Priest's Daughter who Plays the Harlot

^{ESV} **Leviticus 21:9** And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire.

Many teach that this passage pertains to a priest's daughter who becomes a temple prostitute, but the Hebrew words do not support that notion. Nor do they support the punishment many say she deserves.

The key words in this verse are “profanes” (“chalah” – חָלַל – 2940) and “whoring” (“zanah” – זָנָה – 2181).

“Zanah” is oftentimes translated ‘harlot’ or ‘prostitute’. It is first used in the story of Dinah and Shechem. In the story, Dinah was visiting some of the girls in Shechem² when Shechem – the prince – saw her and had a sexual relationship with her. Many translations describe what happened using words such as humiliated, violated, forced, defiled, etc., but the true meaning of the Hebrew word in its context³ means “humbled” as shown in the LXX -

^{LXE} **Genesis 34:2** And Sychem the son of Emmor the Evite, the ruler of the land, saw her, and took her and lay with her, and humbled her.

“Humbled” is the term that is used when a man takes a captive as a wife (Deut. 21:14), when a man commits adultery with another man's wife (Deut. 22:24), and when a man has a consensual relationship with a woman to whom he is not betrothed (Deut. 22:29) – which is the case here. All three are consensual relationships.

Based on the meaning of the Hebrew word and by the fact that Jacob and his brothers agreed that Dinah and Shechem should marry⁴, it is clear that Dinah was not raped but rather acted promiscuously.

With that said, the brothers – in trying to justify their evil acts – falsely accuse Shechem saying the he treated Dinah like a prostitute - a harlot. In the passage, ‘prostitute’ is translated from the Hebrew word “zanah”

^{ESV} **Genesis 34:31** But they said, "Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?"

But the brothers – as well as Jacob - knew what had happened. She did not prostitute herself nor did Shechem treat her like a prostitute. Rather, their sister seduced, or was seduced by Shechem. There was no harlotry involved, and she was certainly not participating in ‘temple prostitution’.

Going back to the instructions concerning the priest's daughter, we see that she being a “zanah” does not automatically mean that she was a temple prostitute. In fact, it is more likely that she was not. Most children – at least until they leave home – follow the religious path of their parents. In this case, the father was a priest of Israel, a follower of the God of Israel. Therefore, it's highly unlikely that she participated in pagan harlotry. On the other hand, she was human and subject to human lusts. Therefore, she – like Dinah, was promiscuous.

² a city in the territory of Shechem in the land of Canaan. Shechem means “peace”

³ ‘anah’ (אַנָּה – 6031) means to be occupied, afflict, humble

⁴ this is in accordance with Deut. 22:28-29



What about “profaning her father”? The Hebrew word for “profane” is “chalal” (חָלַל – 2490) and according to Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon⁵, the primary meaning is “to bore through, to pierce”. It is the same word used to describe what happened in the death of Messiah Yeshua –

^{ESV} **Isaiah 53:5** But he was wounded (chalal) for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

In Yeshua’s case, He was pierced with a spear, but like many Hebrew words, “chalal” does have another meaning. It can also mean “to defile, to pollute”. This is the intended meaning when Jacob reminded Reuben that he would amount to little because he had relations with his Jacob’s concubines.

^{ESV} **Genesis 49:3** "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. ⁴ Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it- he went up to my couch!"

In this case, Reuben used these women in an attempt to take over as patriarch of the family.

So what happens when the priest’s daughter profanes herself, and how does that profane the priest?

In the Hebrew culture, once a young woman loses her virginity, she is considered to be defiled and is not readily married. Men generally preferred virgins, so if she was not one, it was difficult to find a husband for her. In the literal sense, she was already “chalal” - pierced.

In regards to the priest, his service was in some ways profaned because of his daughter’s actions while still in his house. The Torah teaches us to teach God’s words to our children, and the priests were considered to be teachers of Israel. Therefore, the priest should have his daughter under control. Paul hints at this in his letter to Timothy –

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 3:4** He (a leader) must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,

By his daughter being promiscuous while in his house, it indicates that this priest was not in control of his family. But there is another way the priest could be “profaned”. In David’s psalm where he pleads for judgment on those

^{ESV} **Psalms 109:21-22** But you, O GOD my Lord, deal on my behalf for your name's sake; because your steadfast love is good, deliver me! ²² For I am poor and needy, and my heart is stricken within me.

In this passage, the word “stricken” comes from the Hebrew word “chalal”. David’s heart is metaphorically “pierced” by the words of his accusers. Such would be the case of the priest whose daughter is promiscuous. He’s heartbroken for what she has done, how it affects him, and how it will affect her.

What then is the punishment for a promiscuous woman? According to the scripture, she – like Dinah – would marry the man she had had relations with.

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 22:28-29** "If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, ²⁹ then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the

⁵ Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon; Francis Brown; Hendrickson Publishers; Peabody, MA; 14th printing in July 2012; pg. 319a



young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated (Heb. “anah” – humbled) her. He may not divorce her all his days.⁶

A parallel passage to the above indicates what would happen if the father will not allow her to marry the man.

^{ESV} **Exodus 22:16-17** "If a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. ¹⁷ If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins.

This passage leaves an opening where the daughter may spend the rest of her life unmarried.

What we've seen from these two examples is that the penalty described for these two types of sin is that the person or persons is either “cut off from his people”, or in the case of the priests daughter, she must marry the man she had relations with, or she might remain unmarried.

So where does burned with fire come in?

God's View on Burning a Person Alive

The Torah prescribes various penalties for those who commit certain sexual sins. Only some require the death penalty. The majority of sexual sins cause the offender(s) to be “cut off from their people”, which in many cases would mean that they are banished from the community of Israel⁷, but could include the death penalty⁸. In regards to the cases described above, neither specifically prescribe the death penalty, they simply state that the offenders shall be burned. So what does that mean? To help us understand what it does mean, it is important that we understand what it does not mean, and what it does not mean is being burned alive.

Offering Your Children to Molech

As we touched on earlier, in the midst of the passages that speak of sexual sins (Lev.18), Moses writes –

^{ESV} **Leviticus 18:21** You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

This – according to verse three of this chapter, was a practice that not only took place in Canaan, but was something they may have practiced in Egypt.

^{ESV} **Leviticus 18:3** You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. (see footnote ⁹)

So the Hebrew people were familiar with this disgusting practice, but because God knew He was taking them to a land where it was also practiced, He continually reminded them to stay away from it. As Moses was nearing the end of his life, he reminded Israel in regards to the pagan practices of the Canaanite people. He said –

⁶ in this rendition, the word “seizes” is from the Hebrew “taphas” (טָפַס – 8610). It is generally translated “take, catch, handle”, etc. It is first used in regard to a person who “handles a harp”. There is no indication that this is rape. When a woman is raped, the word “chazaq” (2388) is used as in Deut. 22:25.

⁷ See Lev. 18:1-30. One of the listed offenses includes a man marrying sisters, which was the case of Jacob. It is hard to believe that God would prescribe the death penalty for an offense that brought forth over half of the tribes of Israel.

⁸ the death penalty is later prescribed for many of the offenses describe in Lev.18. See Lev. 20.

⁹ the English Standard Version is somewhat protective of the Hebrews by saying that “they” (the Egyptians and the Canaanites) did these things. The Hebrew text does confine these practices to those people, thus leaving an opening to the possibility that the Hebrews did offer their children to Molech.



^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 12:31** You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, **for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.**

This was child sacrifice performed in a very cruel way. An article in Chabad.org describes how this gruesome practice was done by the Jewish people in the days of king Ahaz.¹⁰

How did the Molech work in the valley of Ben-Hinnom? It was built outside of Jerusalem. It was an idol with the face of a calf and open hands like someone who wants to take something from another. They would light this idol on fire until his hands were scorching. There were seven chambers before him and according to the quality of the sacrifice that is how close one could come to him. If one came with a bird, then chamber one; goat, chamber two; sheep, chamber three; calf, chamber four; cow, chamber five; and ox, chamber six.

He who brought his child, the priests would say that he is offering the greatest sacrifice. He would enter the innermost chamber and go kiss the Molech . . .

The priests would then take the child and place it near the Molech. They would then bang with drums to drown out the cries.

Other sources indicate that the bronze idol of Molech was heated to the point that it glowed and the child was placed alive on the scorching hands. It was so heinous that the parents would not place the child themselves, but would give it to the priests to perform the gruesome deed. As the parents retreated, drums were beat and horns were blown to drown out the screams of the innocent child.

Burning a Person Alive Never Came to His Mind

So God forbid this type of worship. Burning children is the exact opposite of God's character. Here's what He said about it.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 19:5** (You) and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, **which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind** -

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 32:35** They built the high places of Baal in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though **I did not command them, nor did it enter into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.**

YHVH drove Israel and Judah into captivity in part because of this gruesome practice. To burn a person alive – or any living thing as far as that's concerned - is something He never imagined his people would do. So as punishment for doing it, what did He prescribe?

^{ESV} **Leviticus 20:2** "Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. **The people of the land shall stone him with stones.**

Yes – even for such a grievous sin as burning your child alive, God's punishment was stoning – a relatively fast way to die¹¹ and not nearly as painful. God doesn't do to them as they did to their children. Why? Because God is not into torture. He is a God of love, and as we grow to know Him and His great plan for each of us individually, it would be hard for a person to see Him that way if He were to torture them for their sins.

¹⁰ https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/4372130/jewish/The-Tragic-History-of-Molech-Child-Sacrifice.htm#footnote8a4372130

¹¹ some believe that stoning was performed by holding a person down and dropping a huge stone on his head to instantly kill him



God does not even want the animals used in sacrifice to suffer. Scripture shows that when animals are sacrificed their throat was to be slit and the blood drained out of them before they were laid on the fire¹². Again, God is not into cruelty and torture.

Burning – A Punishment for Sin?

Now that we know that God forbid burning a child on an altar, and that even the animal sacrifices – which were offered as substitutes for the sinners - were not burned alive, does it make sense that God would have human beings burn their own brothers and sisters alive for their sins? Certainly not!

So what was the punishment for the sins defined in Leviticus 18 and 20 that we discussed earlier. What does it mean “she shall be burned with fire”? The answer can be found in the book of Joshua where it describes the sin of Achan. In that story, unbeknownst to Joshua, Achan took for himself some of the spoil of Jericho – a deed that infuriated YHWH. As a result, Israel lost the next battle along with 36 men. Joshua cried out to God to find out why, and God said to him -

^{NKJ} **Joshua 7:10 - 8:1** ... "Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face? ¹¹ "Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. ... ¹⁴ 'In the morning therefore you shall be brought according to your tribes. And it shall be *that* the tribe which the LORD takes shall come according to families; and the family which the LORD takes shall come by households; and the household which the LORD takes shall come man by man. ¹⁵ 'Then it shall be *that* he who is taken with the accursed thing shall be **burned with fire**, he and all that he has, **because he has transgressed the covenant** of the LORD, and **because he has done a disgraceful thing in Israel.**' " ...

So all the tribes came before Joshua and nothing was found. Finally it came down to the family of Achan, apparently the only one left, and Joshua said -

¹⁹ ... "My son, I beg you, give glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done; do not hide *it* from me." ²⁰ And Achan answered Joshua and said, "Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and this is what I have done: ... ²⁵ And Joshua said, "Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day.

So it was determined that Achan was the guilty party. Therefore, the sentence of being burned with fire had to be carried out. This is what happened next -

" **So all Israel stoned him with stones**; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. ²⁶ Then they raised over him a great heap of stones, still there to this day. So the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the Valley of Achor to this day.

In this example, we see that the punishment of being “burned with fire” is to first be put to death in a humane way and then the body was burned. Why was that punishment? Because it kept you from being buried in the ground – the way God intended.

^{NKJ} **Genesis 3:19** In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you *are*, And to dust you shall return."

Apparently it was a disgrace to not be buried in the ground, so Joshua built a heap of stones to show that Achan was not buried, but his ashes were left on top of the ground.

¹² Lev. 3:2



Who Does Burn People Alive?

Our God is not into burning people alive. Only pagan cultures burn people alive. The Canaanite people would burn their children in the “hands” of a bronze idol, and a thousand years later, the Romans would burn their political enemies alive. For instance, the Roman emperor Nero would burn people alive for any number of reasons. In fact, many of his victims were Christians who he claimed started the fire that burned much of Rome. According to the website “All That’s Interesting”¹³ in an article entitled “History’s Worst Execution Methods”, it says -

Many of the very worst execution methods ever devised involve fire — from burning witches at the stake in medieval Britain to roasting criminals alive in the searing metal insides of the brazen bull in Ancient Greece — but few match the sheer lack of humanity as the Roman Candle. A rumored favorite of the mad Roman Emperor Nero, this method saw the subject tied to a stake and smeared with flammable pitch (tree or plant resin), then set ablaze, slowly burning to death from the feet up.

Do we have a God who would do such a thing? Does our God, the God who has no delight in the death of the wicked¹⁴, desire that the sinner – maybe the young girl who makes one passionate mistake - die a slow torturous death. No we don’t. Quite to the contrary, we have a God who is exceedingly merciful. As King David said after numbering Israel -

^{ESV} **2 Samuel 24:14** ... "I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man."

Shalom Alecheim

¹³ <https://allthatsinteresting.com/worst-execution-methods/5>

¹⁴ Ezekiel 33:11