

Fire That Is Never Quenched?

Some may wonder about the verses that mention fire that “never shall be quenched.” So let’s look at those verses.

But before we examine the New Testament verses, two passages from the Old Testament will help illuminate the New Testament uses of "unquenchable fire."

One in Isaiah 66:24 speaks of looking upon dead bodies. Whatever it refers to, one thing is clear -- living beings in torment are not being viewed, but dead bodies.

ISAIAH 66:24 KJV

24 And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcases of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.

The second Old Testament passage we want to examine referred to national judgment on Israel which involved the burning of Jerusalem with fire that “shall not be quenched.” In Jeremiah 17:27 God said that unless the people repented He would, “kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.”

Fulfilling what Jeremiah spoke, 2 Chronicles 36:19 says, “they burnt the house of God, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem, and burnt all the palaces thereof with fire.” Then verse 21 says, “To fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah.” So we know 2 Chronicles 36 is the fulfillment of the “fire that shall not be quenched” God promised in Jeremiah 17:27. Here is proof Scripture calls fire “unquenchable” when it refers to fires that only burned until what they were burning was finished burning. Certainly those fires in Jerusalem are not still burning.

Jesus and His listeners would have been familiar with these Scriptures from Isaiah and Jeremiah. So they provide the background for the New Testament use of “unquenchable fire.”

Only two verses in the New Testament, both from the same passage, mention “hell” and fire that is not quenched. In both verses, “hell” is the translation of Gehenna, the literal valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem.¹

MARK 9:43, 45 KJV

43 And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the **fire that never shall be quenched**:

45 And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the **fire that never shall be quenched**:

¹ For more information read the section on Gehenna in the chapter “Words Translated As Hell.”

In both verses above, I have placed the words in bold that are used in the KJV to translate two Greek words: **pyr asbeston**. The Greek word “pyr” (also spelled “pur”), is the normal word for fire. The Greek word “asbestos”² is only used two other times in the New Testament.

Here are the other two verses that use the Greek word “asbestos” in the New Testament.

MATTHEW 3:12 KJV

12 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with **unquenchable fire**.

LUKE 3:17 KJV

17 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with **fire unquenchable**.

In both these verses, which refer to Jesus, the words in bold are the translation of the Greek words “**asbesto pyri**” which are different forms of the same words used in Mark 9:43 and Mark 9:45 (listed above). In all the New Testament, the Greek word “asbestos” (Strong's #762) is used only four times. So we have only these four verses to see how God used this word.

To understand these verses it helps to know what the “chaff” is which will be burned. Chaff is not weeds or bad wheat. Chaff is the outer husk covering the wheat kernel. Chaff is not something separate or different from good wheat. Chaff is a necessary part of good wheat, but a part that becomes unnecessary after harvest. Until harvest time the chaff protects the wheat kernel. After harvest the chaff is separated from the wheat kernel by threshing and discarded.

So saying Jesus will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire could not be talking about burning bad people. Instead it must refer to burning off unnecessary things and refining those people the Lord refers to as His “wheat” which He gathers to keep.

If the Bible intended to picture for us two types of people, the good who were pictured as wheat, and the bad being pictured as chaff, then it chose a bad example. The farmers Jesus spoke to would not think of wheat and chaff as two separate varieties – like good and bad people. So these two verses must apply to what Jesus does with the unnecessary and detrimental stuff of those who belong to Him – not His enemies.

Another point not to be missed is that natural “chaff” from wheat is not burned with fire that is “never” put out. Once the chaff is burned, the fire will go out. But not before it has finished its job of burning up what is referred to, the chaff. All this is to say that it is unwarranted to insert the word “never” in Mark 9:43 and 45. The word “never” is not in the Greek text. The same Greek words are used in Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17. If they mean “never” in one place, they should mean “never” in all four verses. But it would be absurd to talk of chaff being burned with fire that “never” goes out. So they don't.

In summary, Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17 contain the same Greek words used in Mark 9:43 and 45 to translate “fire that **never** shall be quenched.” But they use those words to describe the

² Asbestos, asbesto, and abeston are different forms of the same Greek word, Strong's #762.

Lord “burning” the outer protective husks (chaff) from the wheat kernels. And the wheat kernels are obviously a type of God’s people.

There is no justification for using the word “never” in Mark 9:43 and 45. Especially because the Old Testament occurrences of “unquenchable fire” cannot refer to fires that are still burning.

There are three more verses in the New Testament that mention a fire that is not quenched – all from the same passage in Mark 9 we have been examining above.

MARK 9:44,46,48 KJV

44 Where their worm dieth not, and the **fire is not quenched**.

46 Where their worm dieth not, and the **fire is not quenched**.

48 Where their worm dieth not, and the **fire is not quenched**.

These verses would obviously cause the hearers to think of Isaiah 66:24, quoted above, which contains the same wording. Isaiah clearly refers to dead men (carcasses), not living people in continuing torment.

By simply doing a word search through the whole Bible for verses that contain both the English words “not” and “quenched” you will easily see that God used this terminology referring to things that obviously do not have to last forever.

There is nothing in the Greek New Testament that requires, or justifies, adding the qualifier “never” in any of these verses from Mark. It simply means fire that will not be put out until it burns up completely whatever it is burning. It is a fire that cannot be quenched until its purpose is accomplished.

It is also important to remember that no one in the Bible ever talked about “fire” and Gehenna but Jesus when He was talking to Jews who lived nearby and were familiar with this literal valley of Hinnom. There is no reason we should not take the Bible literally and realize that Jesus was speaking to Jews about a literal garbage dump outside Jerusalem where unburied bodies of criminals were thrown. In that garbage dump were always worms and fires burning continuously.