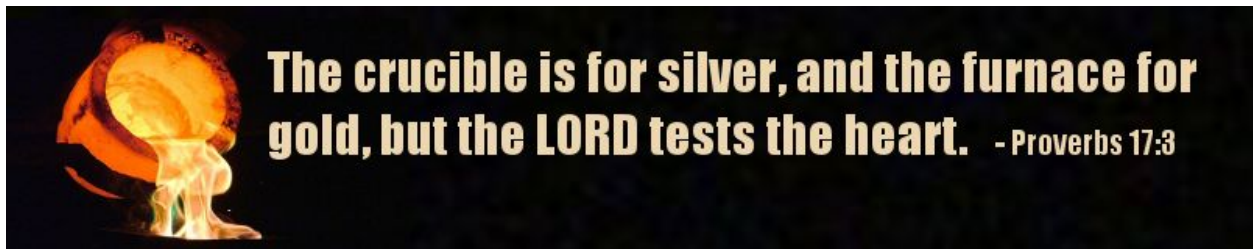


What is the Lake of Fire?

By Michael Webber

“The devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are also. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” - Revelation 20:10.

Modern bible translations depict the lake of fire as the most terrifying place imaginable. A realm of eternal torture in fire. The problem is the Apostle John is not talking about a lake at all but a tiny pool of molten metal called a crucible.



For most Christians this will be the first time you understand these passages. The actual word picture used in these passages has been completely lost in translation simply because the translators are not metallurgists. Are you curious? Keep reading.

The lake of fire with sulfur is the image of an ancient gold refining process. Literally a crucible of molten gold with sulfur added to eliminate impurities. This understanding is confirmed in Revelation 3:18. “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire.” Christ himself uses the image of gold refined in fire when rebuking the church in Laodicea for being neither hot nor cold.

The lake of fire was never meant to be understood as an actual lake or realm of punishment in literal fire. Rather the lake of fire is merely a picture of the gold refiner’s crucible, the process of purifying gold. Understanding the imagery of the Greek words behind these passages brings the text to life.

The Greek word translated as “lake” literally means a pond, large or small, depending on the context. This is the Greek word *limné*: “Probably from *limen* (through the idea of nearness of shore); a pond (large or small) -- lake.” (Strong’s Concordance).

Thus the lake of fire is the image of a tiny pond of molten metal as we would see in a refiner's crucible not a lake filled with fire. Only a psychopath would torture people in literal fire for all eternity. Most certainly God, who is love, would not do such a thing nor would it come to his mind.

Sulfur, also known as brimstone, has been used in the refining of metals since ancient times. Gold refining by sulphurization is even still done by the United States mint (a). Sulfur is highly reactive and by adding small amounts of sulfur to the crucible unwanted metals are transformed into sulphides. This reaction will even flash and smoke. The gold itself is resistant to this reaction and will settle to bottom in a more purified form since the other metals, now trapped as sulphides, float to the top. The ancients would not have understood the chemistry behind this process but they most certainly understood the results. Pure gold!

But what about being tormented in fire? The Greek word translated as "torment" is actually the word "touchstone". This is the Greek word "basanizó". "Cognate: 931 básanos – originally, a black, silicon-based stone used as "a touchstone" to test the purity of precious metals (like silver and gold)." - (Strong's Concordance). The Greek word *básanos* is where we get the word "basalt", a type of rock that was used for making touchstones in the ancient world.

The use of the word *touchstone* absolutely confirms the lake of fire is a gold refiner's crucible. A touchstone was used in ancient times to check the purity of gold and is still used by jewelers today. By the striking a line of gold on the touchstone the color produced reveals the level of purity. That is the meaning of the word "tormented" in modern bibles, a process for testing the purity of gold.

An additional test for assaying the gold can be performed as well. By applying an acid to the line of gold on the touchstone the non-gold elements will react and even smoke (c.). The more impurities on the stone the more it will smoke.

Therefore the lake of fire is not a realm of eternal torture in fire. The lake of fire is a metaphor of gold refining and not an actual place or lake at all. The Apostle John is using the abstract idea of a person being refined, then tested and refined again, with each cycle resulting in higher grades of purity. This is not an endless process.

The Greek words translated as "forever and ever" are more literally translated as "in the ages of ages". The words used in the passage are cognate adjectives from the Greek word *aión*. **Short Definition:** an age, a cycle of time. (Strong's Greek: 165).

Modern bible translations have also dropped the preposition “in” and inserted “forever”. The Greek preposition is “eis,” pronounced “ice”. Strong’s 1519 *Definition*: into, in, unto, to, upon, towards, for, among. Literally this means “in” or moving into. (Strong’s Greek: 1519).

Therefore if accurately translated we should read, “in the ages of ages.” This applies to all the passages in Revelation translated as “forever and ever.” For example, “*They will reign forever and ever*” is incorrect. It should read “*They will reign in the ages of ages*”.

Getting the preposition correct is critical to understanding these passages. It is the difference between the idea of merely being somewhere and a duration of time. In other words the passage is telling when this will happen not specifically how long it will take. Just like WWII occurred *in* the 20th century but did not last through it.

Evil doers will be tested and refined by God for as long as it takes, in the ages of ages. This is to return them to the pure state in which they were originally created to be. Early church fathers called this “the apokatastasis”, the restoration of all people and all things.

This passage should be translated:

“The devil who deceived them was thrown into the refiner’s crucible with sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are also. They will be tested for purity day and night in the ages of ages.” - Revelation 20:10.

Therefore they will be tested and refined in the ages of ages and not literally through all eternity. Although not a torture chamber in fire this passage it is still a picture of justice. Some have speculated that true justice would be to experience the pain and suffering we caused for others through the eyes of our victims. That if we were careless and selfish and lived without mercy toward others we also will not receive mercy in equal measure. As believers we are taught to be merciful because mercy triumphs over judgment

“So speak, and so do, as men who are to be judged by a law of freedom. For judgment is without mercy to him who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” - (James 2:12-13).

So from now on when you read about the “lake of fire” remember the tiny crucible used for refining gold. That is the imagery the Apostle John is actually using, the so-called lake of fire.

Dear follower of Christ,

Be kind, shun sin, love mercy, and love your neighbor as yourself. Otherwise the refiner's crucible may be your destination as well. Sanctification is what a good and holy God insists upon.

References:

(a.) Gold refining by sulphurization:

https://www.911metallurgist.com/blog/gold-refining-methods#goldrefining_by_sulphurisation

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Depletion_gilding

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(b.) Greek word meanings Strong's Concordance <http://biblehub.com/strongs.htm>

(c.) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touchstone_\(assaying_tool\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touchstone_(assaying_tool))

An example sulphuric acid reactions with smoke <https://youtu.be/CL8PL-EZipc>

Tentmaker ministries video: <https://youtu.be/oseCbaqoU6c>

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