

THE WRATH OF GOD IN FINAL JUDGEMENT & THE
ESCHATOLOGICAL FIRES OF HELL ARE EVERLASTING

[Ideological Development - Two Views Permanent - Two Views Temporary](#)
[C.A.R.M. Resources - Ruined Reputations - Article Series - Second Death](#)

What Happens When You Die?



By David L. Burris

Curious Minds Want To Know!

Chinese Consignment By Bureaucrat

- Taoists hold that hell is ruled by the Yan-Wang, the Supreme Master Of Hell, who presides over the 18 levels of hell. China had a distinct hierarchy and the eighteen levels represented the eighteen different classes of people & professions at the time. In each level the soul can expect a different torture, depending on its sins and, more importantly, occupation during life. ...the soul would be tormented and made to suffer unendurable agonies by demons who had themselves once been alive. They had all had the same occupation – that of politician – and have no hope of reprieve. - Richard Craze, Hell, pgs. 30, 91

OUR STUDY NOT ABOUT FOREIGN CULTURES



Traditional Derivative & Philosophical Deductive

R.H. Savage, Life After Death, 1907, 1035:

- ***"If the doctrine of eternal punishment was clearly and unmistakably taught in every leaf of the Bible, and on every leaf of all the Bibles of all the world, I could not believe a word of it. I should appeal from these misconceptions of even the seers and the great men to the infinite & eternal Good, who only is God, and who only on such terms could be worshiped."***

Playwright Jean-Paul Sartre In "No Exit" -

- ***Sartre Asks Us To Imagine Hell As A Shabby Hotel Where Three Sinners Are Forever Tied To One Another In A Vicious Circle & Where Each Mentally Torments, and Is Tormented By, The Others. There Is No Need For Red-Hot Pokers Or Burning Sulphur Because - "Hell Is Other People!"***

Serious Stuff: Not About False Humor

• **Internet Posting On Physics Of Hell:**


- **A thermodynamics professor had made a take home exam for his college students. It had one question:**

- ***Is Hell Exothermic Or Endothermic? Support Your Answer With A Proof!***
Most of the students wrote proofs of their beliefs using Boyle's Law or some variant.

One of his students wrote the following answer:

- ***"First, we postulate that if souls exist, then they must have some mass. If they do, then a mole of souls can also have a mass. So, at what rate are souls moving into hell and at what rate are souls leaving? I think we can safely assume that once a soul gets into hell, it will not leave. Therefore, no souls are leaving. As for souls entering hell, lets look at the different religions that exist in the world today. Some of these religions state that if you are not a member of their religion, you will go to hell. Since there are more than one of these religions and people do not belong to more than one religion, we can project that all people, and all souls, go to hell.***
- ***With birth and death rates as they are, we can expect the number of souls in hell to increase exponentially. Now, we look at the rate of change in volume in hell. Boyle's Law states that in order for the temperature and pressure in hell to stay the same, the ratio of the mass of souls and volume needs to stay constant.***
- ***#1 So, if hell is expanding at a slower rate at which souls enter hell, then the temperature and pressure in hell will increase until all hell breaks loose.***
- ***#2 Of course, if hell is expanding at a rate faster than the increase of souls in hell, then the temperature and pressure will drop until hell freezes over..."*** -- This Student Got The Only A.

NDE: NOT ABOUT POPULAR CULTURE



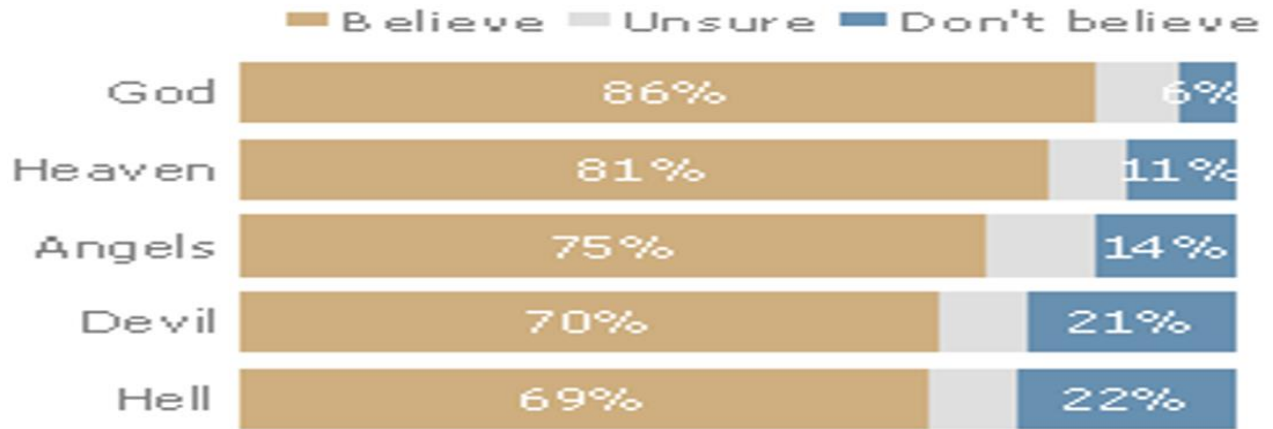
- **Personal Testimonies: Eighth Century Forward Recorded Experiences Both Positive & Negative**
- **Professional Diagnosis: Medical Inquiries & Cross-Cultural Studies Accept Patient Observations But Reject Religious Conclusions**
- **Physiological Counter-Explanations Include: Metabolic Disturbances - Cerebral Anoxia In Low Oxygen & High Carbon Dioxide - Delirium Or Hallucination - Temporal Lobe Seizure - Combine**
- **“One of the near-death experience truths is that each person integrates their near-death experience into their own pre-existing belief system.” - Judy Long**
- **Irregardless - For Those Involved In These Incidents - There Is Change To The Core Of Being - Transforming In Outlook Toward Life & In One's Worldview - They Become Different People!**

From Book Intro of *Beyond Death's Door* by Maurice Rawlings, M.D.

“Public interest in these (afterlife) questions continues to grow as more people survive the death experience thru modern restorative techniques called *resuscitation*, which involves breathing for the patient and maintaining his heartbeat until he can recover his own functions...

Many people have wondered why recently reported ‘life beyond’ experiences all seem to be good ones. As a cardiologist exposed to critically ill patients in the coronary units of several hospitals, I have had many opportunities to resuscitate people who have clinically died. I have found that an interview immediately after the patients are revived reveals as many bad experiences as good ones...”

GALLUP POLL
". . . please tell me whether it is something you believe in, something you're not sure about, or something you don't believe in. . . ."



INSPIRED SCRIPTURE ANSWERS MANY QUESTIONS

DEMON TESTIMONY: Truth From Hell About Truth Of Hell!

- Etymology Of Term “Demon” Comes From Greek Root “To Know” Hence The Meaning Of “A Knowing One” (Vine)
- Plato Wrote In Cratylus That The Term Derived From “Daemon” Signifying “Knowing” Or “Wise” (Page 92)
- Ancient Greek Writers Suggested That The Genesis Of The Term Is To Be Found In The Fact That These Entities Were Considered “Intelligent Beings” (McClintock & Strong)
- They Were Seen As Evil Spirits That Knew Certain Truths – “Somewhere Between The Human & The Divine” (Arndt, p. 168)
- From Recorded Textual Testimony We Can Reasonably Conclude:
- Demons were not atheists, they believed in God; Even further correct, they were not polytheists – they believed that God is “One” – James 2: 19.
- Although, of admitted faith, it was not coupled with obedience; Disobedient, yet they did not try to justify themselves in their rebellion – James 2: 14 – 18.

DEMON TESTIMONY: Truth From Hell About Truth Of Hell!

- Demons were not religious modernists. They did not subscribe to the notion that Jesus was a mere man. They acknowledged the Lord as “Holy One of God” – Mark 1: 24; In His proximity & presence they cried “...Thou art the Son of God” – Mark 3: 11.
- Demons conceded the divine authority of Christ – a force of power they would be obliged to obey. On one occasion they entreated the Savior that He “would not command them to depart into the abyss” – Luke 8: 31.
- The demons did not deny any personal responsibility. They once inquired of Jesus: “Are you come here to torment us before the time?” – Matt. 8: 29.
- **DEMONS DID NOT DENY HELL AS REAL!**
- **They Knew Conscious Punishment Was Their Future (Matthew 8: 29) & At That Prospect - They Trembled (James 2: 19).**

Leading Captivity Captive:

Bible Case Studies: The Fear Of Death

- Psalm 68: 18, 20, 22 – Israelites were to be brought back to God at Sinai where they would be offered an opportunity to surrender to God – to be His captives; For their surrender to God the children of Israel would be provided with gifts from God and a land of rest that flowed with milk and honey.
- Paul references this psalm and makes comparison to the Savior's death, burial, and resurrection. Just as God through Moses had descended into Egypt to reclaim His captives, God's Son went to reclaim similar captives when he died upon the tree. They were freed so as to enable them to serve God.
- Hebrews chapter two - verses 14 & 15 – informs us as to what happened when Jesus Christ was crucified: [He] "might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives."
- Revelation 1: 18 confirms that the Lord took the keys of death and Hades. He alone currently controls access and egress to and from those regions.
- For The View Of Death Before Christ's Resurrection - Hezekiah In Isaiah 38: 10 – 19; His sentiments were typical regarding that beyond the grave as "the pit of nothingness."
- Death during the Old Testament period involved being cut off from communion with God. For those who had experienced communication with the Almighty - death was a dreaded development – not growth nor graduation.
- David agreed with Hezekiah's view of the situation of death - as a place where he could neither communicate or offer praise – Psalm 6: 5; 115: 17.

goodsalt.com

Leading Captivity Captive:

Bible Case Studies: The Fear Of Death

- Moreover, the man Job said he did not expect to see God in death – 17: 13.
- The general outlook of the ancients was that of a gathering together of nations and peoples – Habakkuk 2: 5. There was some measure of comfort in the company kept during the interim period with those righteous of prior history.
- Romans 3: 21 – 26 reveals that God in His Holy perfection could only overlook the sinful transgressions of the imperfect righteous – putting these outside of His presence - until the time appointed for atonement had arrived.
- Revelation 6: 9, 10 indicates the situation has changed. The righteous are restored in the presence of God beneath the altar.
- Question: What had happened during this interval?
- Answer: Our Savior had led the righteous souls out of the bosom of their father Abraham and brought them to the bosom of their Father in heaven.
- However, Christ did nothing to alter the unforgiven state or punitive condition of those who in life choose wickedness. In addition, the unrighteous continue to go to that fateful and hated Hadean realm of agony awaiting their final sentencing on the Day of Judgment.

goodsalt.com

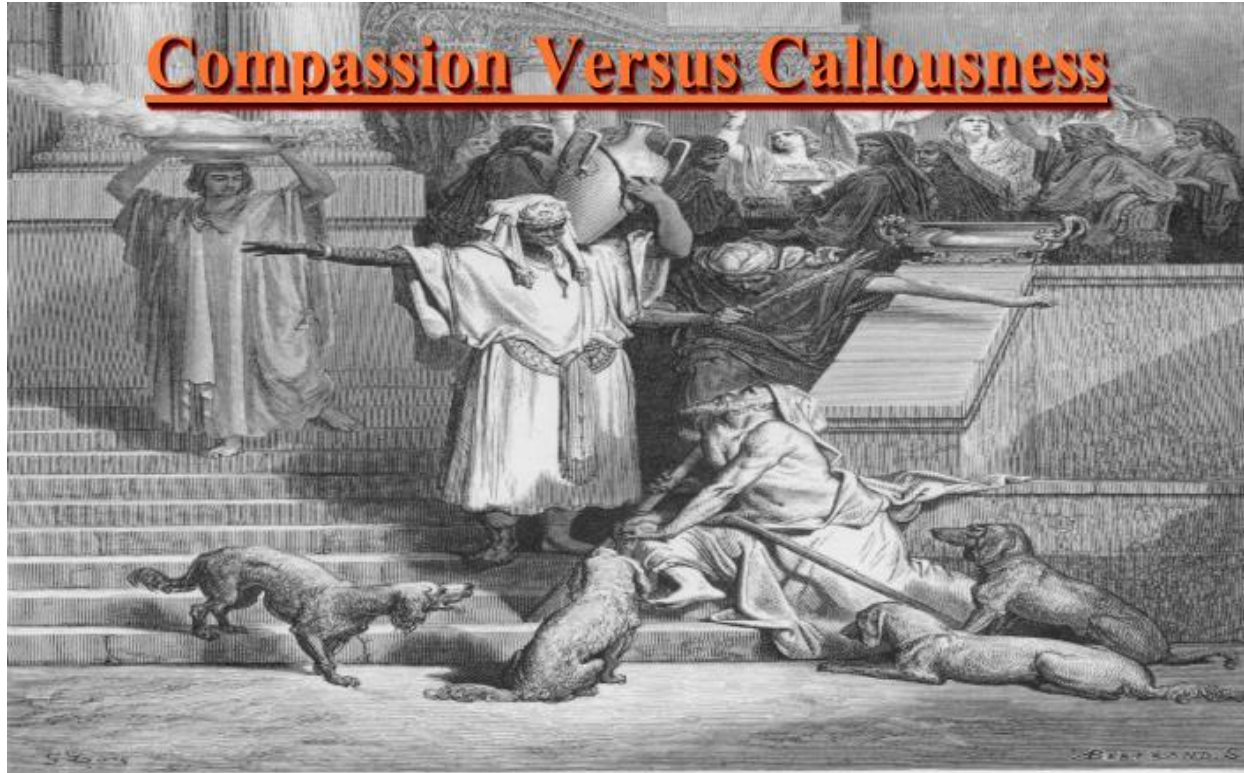
Leading Captivity Captive:

Bible Case Study: Man Jonah Was Type

The Belly Of Hell: The Consequences Of Our Disobedience

- 1: 3 - "Jonah rose up to flee... from the presence of the Lord."
- 1: 6 - Impartial observer could see the seriousness of the situation although Jonah was focused on relaxation.
- 1: 13 - Too late Jonah faced the crisis but by then he felt powerless as to its remedy.
- 1: 15 - Jonah was thrown to swim with the fish but was swallowed whole by one of God's special creation.
- 2: 2 - "Out of the belly of hell cried I"
- 4: 2 - Jonah's reasoning reveals only partial understanding of God's nature - God's grace. Jonah did not have an appreciation of God's wrath and did not sufficiently fear God.





LAZARUS AT THE RICH MAN'S HOUSE
 And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. . . . (Luke 16: 20, 21)

EADEM FERIA.
 De morte Epulonis & Lazari.
 Eodem cap. Anno xxxij.

74
 xxxviii



A. Epulo cum morte lucetatur; abripitur à diabolis eius anima, sepelitur in inferno.
 B. Misere se affligit vxor, et tota familia.
 C. Diripitur a furibus domus.

D. Effodiunt sepulcrum Epuloni in terra homines, vt in inferno demones.
 E. Contra; Lazarum morientem excipit lux, & Angeli portandum in limbum Patrum.

Leading Captivity Captive:

Bible Case Study: The Rich Man

Lord In Luke 16 - Sums By Story - Salient & Significant:

- There has always been two places of destination after death – one of paradise – one of torment.
- Although, there maybe contact through communication, these two places are totally separated, and traffic between them is impossible.
- If we extend our textual reference ten verses beyond the clerical selection of chapter division we have a bigger picture and a broader lesson from the Master Teacher – there is no safety for either the neutral or the harmless – our lives must be positively purposed.
- The rich man's name was not recorded in the Book of Life and was not deemed worthy for mention in the parable; Whereas, Lazarus who did not even live on the margins, but had existed in the shadows, is immortalized in the scripture. While his name was not noted, mentioned, or remembered in the community as of any importance – God saw differently! (Reread passage starting @v. 15)
- The rich man had not done Lazarus any harm – nor had he done him any good. Recognized in reputation and overt deed – he had earned from good society a proper funeral – while dead Lazarus was left exposed to the elements of nature.

goodsalt.com

Leading Captivity Captive:

Bible Case Study: The Rich Man

Lord In Luke 16 - Sums By Story - Salient & Significant:

- The rich man was in hell due to his many sins of omission!
- The starting segment of Luke 17 continues this train of thought.
- Verse 10 of chapter concludes this same line of reasoning with a terrible warning against concepts of minimal obligation and moderated respectability.
- Luke chapters 16 & 17 are logically linked to the sentencing scene in Matthew 25: 45, 46; The two big surprises of judgment day are from that large group that acted without authority and that even larger group that prided itself in its malevolent restraint rather than benevolent practice.
- These two groups together make up the majority in both the sectarian and secular world.
- Most religious people that go to hell will do so for the same reasons as did this rich man!
- The spiritually neutral and ethically harmless in this life are labeled double-minded and do not have a home in heaven – James 1: 6 – 8.

goodsalt.com

Leading Captivity Captive: Bible Case Study: The Rich Man

Lord In Luke 16: 15 - 17: 10 Sums Salient & Significant:

- *Moral To This Story:* In the hereafter –
indecisiveness does not have any sanctuary – there
is not any middle ground or a third way – everyone
takes a position and chooses a side – everyone
experiences consequences of basic choice and of
heart condition in an afterlife heaven or in an
afterlife hell.

goodsalt.com



John Bunyan's Parable Commentary

[USE AND APPLICATION

Of the Preceding portion of the Parable]

Now then, from what hath been said, there might many things be spoken by way of use and application; but I shall be very brief, and but touch some things, and so wind up. And, *First*, I shall begin with the sad condition of those that die out of Christ, and speak something to that. Secondly, To the latter end of the parable, which more evidently concerns the Scripture, and speak somewhat to that.

[First. I shall begin with the sad condition of those that die out of Christ.]

1. Therefore you see that the former part of the parable contains a sad declaration of the state of one living and dying out of Christ; how that they lose heaven for hell, God for the devil, light for darkness, joy for sorrow. 2. How that they have not so much as the least comfort from God, who in the time they live here below neglect coming to him for mercy; not so much as one drop of cold water. 3. That such souls will repent of their folly, when repentance will do them no good, or when they shall be past recovery. 4. That all the comfort such souls are like to have, they have it in this world. 5. That all their groanings and sighs will not move God to mitigate in the least his heavy hand of vengeance that is upon them, for the transgression they have committed against him. 6. That their sad state is irrecoverable, or they must never, mark, never come out of that condition. 7. Their desires will not be hard for their ungodly neighbours. From these things then, I pray you consider the state of those that die out of Christ Jesus; yea, I say, consider their miserable state; and think thus with thyself, Well, if I neglect coming to Christ, I must go to the devil, and he will not neglect to fetch me away into those intolerable torments.

Think thus with thyself, What, shall I lose a long heaven for short pleasure? Shall I buy the pleasures of this world at so dear a rate as to lose my soul for the obtaining of that? Shall I content myself with a heaven that will last no longer than my lifetime? What advantage will these be to me when the Lord shall separate soul and body asunder, and send one to the grave, the other to hell, and at the judgment-day, the final sentence of eternal ruin must be passed upon me?

1. *Consider*, that the profits, pleasures, and vanities of this world will not last for ever, but the time is coming, yea, just at the doors, when they will give thee the slip, and leave thee in the suds, and in the brambles of all that thou hast done. And therefore to prevent this,

2. *Consider* thy dismal state, think thus with thyself, It is true, I do love my sins, my lusts and pleasures; but what good will they do me at the day of death and of judgment? Will my sins do me good then? Will they be able to help me when I come to fetch my last breath? What good will my profits do me? And what good will my vanities do, when death says he will have no nay? What good will all my companions, fellow-jesters, jeerers, liars, drunkards, and all my wantons do me? Will they help to ease the pains of hell? Will these help to turn the hand of God from inflicting his fierce anger upon me? Nay, will not they rather cause God to show me no mercy, to give me no comfort; but rather to thrust me down in the hottest place of hell, where I may swim in fire and brimstone.

3. *Consider* thus with thyself, Would I be glad to have all, every one of my sins to come in against me, to inflame the justice of God against me? Would I be glad to be bound up in them as

the three children were bound in their clothes, and to be as really thrown into the fiery furnace of the wrath of Almighty God as they were into Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace?

4. *Consider* thus, Would I be glad to have all, and every one of the ten commandments, to discharge themselves against my soul? The first saying, Damn him, for he hath broken me; the second saying, Damn him, for he hath broken me, &c. Consider how terrible this will be, yea, more terrible than if thou shouldest have ten of the biggest pieces of ordnance in England to be discharged against thy body, thunder, thunder, one after another! Nay, this would not be comparable to the reports that the law, for the breach thereof, will give against thy soul; for those can but kill the body, but these will kill both body and soul; and that not for an hour, a day, a month, or a year, but they will condemn thee for ever.

Mark, it is for ever, for ever. It is into everlasting damnation, eternal destruction, eternal wrath and displeasure from God, eternal gnawings of conscience, eternal continuance with devils. O consider, it may be the thought of seeing the devil doth now make thine hair to stand right up on thine head. O but this, to be damned, to be among all the devils, and that not only for a time, as I said before, but for ever, to all eternity! This is wonderfully miserable, ever miserable; that no tongue of man, no, nor of angels, is able to express it.

5. *Consider* much with thyself, Not only my sins against the law will be laid to my charge, but also the sins I have committed in slighting the gospel, the glorious gospel. These also must come with a voice against me. As thus, Nay, he is worthy to be damned, for he rejected the gospel, he slighted the free grace of God tendered in the gospel; how many times was thou, damned wretch, invited, intreated, beseeched to come to Christ, to accept of mercy, that thou mightest have heaven, thy sins pardoned, thy soul saved, and body and soul glorified, and all this for nothing but the acceptance, and through faith forsaking those imps of Satan, which by their embracements have drawn thee downward toward the gulf of God's eternal displeasure? How often didst thou read the promises, yea, the free promises of the common salvation! How oft didst thou read the sweet counsels and admonitions of the gospel, to accept of the grace of God! But thou wouldst not, thou regardst it not, thou didst slight all.

Second. As I would have thee to consider the sad and woeful state of those that die out of Christ, and are past all recovery, so would I have thee consider the many mercies and privileges thou enjoyest above some, peradventure, of thy companions that are departed to their proper place. As,

1. *Consider*, thou hast still the thread of thy life lengthened, which for thy sins might seven years ago, or more, have been cut asunder, and thou have dropped down amongst the flames.

2. *Consider* the terms of reconciliation by faith in Christ are still proffered unto thee, and thou invited, yea, entreated to accept of them.

3. *Consider* the terms of reconciliation are but-bear with me though I say but-only to believe in Jesus Christ, with that faith that purifies the heart, and enables thy soul to feed on him effectually, and be saved from this sad state.

4. *Consider* the time of thy departure is at hand, and the time is uncertain, and also that for ought thou knowest the day of grace may be past to thee before thou diest, not lasting so long as thy uncertain life in this world. And if so, then know for certain that thou art as sure to be damned as if thou wast in hell already; if thou convert not in the meanwhile.

5. *Consider* it may be some of thy friends are giving all diligence to make their calling and election sure, being resolved for heaven, and thou thyself endeavourest as fast to make sure of hell, as if resolved to have it; and together with this, consider how it will grieve thee that while thou wast making sure of hell thy friends were making sure of heaven; but more of this by and by.

6. *Consider* what a sad reflection this will have on thy soul, to see thy friends in heaven, and thyself in hell; thy father in heaven, and thou in hell; thy mother in heaven, and thou in hell; thy brother, thy sister, thy children in heaven, and thou in hell. As Christ said to the Jews of their relations according to the flesh, so may I say to thee concerning thy friends, ‘There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth,’ when you shall see your fathers and mothers, brethren and sisters, husbands and wives, children and kinsfolk, with your friends and neighbours in the kingdom of heaven, and thou thyself thrust out (Luke 13:27–29).

But again, because I would not only tell thee of the damnable state of those that die out of Christ, but also persuade thee to take hold of life, and go to heaven, take notice of these following things.

(1.) Consider that whatever thou canst do, as to thy acceptance with God, is not worth the dirt of thy shoes, but is all ‘as filthy rags’ (Isa 54:6).

(2.) Consider that all the conditions of the new covenant, as to salvation, are and have been completely fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ, and that for sinners.

(3.) Consider that the Lord calls to thee, for to receive whatsoever Christ hath done, and that on free cost (Rev 22:17).

(4.) Consider that thou canst not honour God more than to close in with his proffers of grace, mercy, and pardon of sin (Rom 4).

Again, that which will add to all the rest, thou shalt have the very mercy of God, the blood of Christ, the preachers of the word, together with every sermon, all the promises, invitations, exhortations, and all the counsels and threatenings of the blessed word of God. Thou shalt have all thy thoughts, words, and actions, together with all thy food, thy raiment, thy sleep, thy goods, and also all hours, days, weeks, months and years, together with whatsoever else God hath given thee. I say, thy abuse of all these shall come up in judgment against thy soul; for God will reckon with thee for everything, whether it be good or bad (Eccl 12:14).

(5.) Nay further, it is so unreasonable a thing for a sinner to refuse the gospel, that the very devils themselves will come in against thee, as well as Sodom, that damned crew. May not they, I say, come in against thee, and say, O thou simple man! O vile wretch! That had not so much care of thy soul, thy precious soul, as the beast hath of its young, or the dog of the very bone that lieth before him. Was thy soul worth so much, and didst thou so little regard it? Were the thunder-claps of the law so terrible, and didst thou so slight them? Besides, was the gospel so freely, so frequently, so fully tendered to thee, and yet hast thou rejected all these things? Hast thou valued sin at a higher rate than thy soul, than God, Christ, angels, saints, and communion with them in eternal blessedness and glory? Wast thou not told of hell-fire, those intolerable flames? Didst thou never hear of the intolerable roarings of the damned ones that are therein? Didst thou never hear or read that doleful saying in Luke 16, how the sinful man cries out among the flames, ‘One drop of water to cool my tongue?’ Thus, I say, may the very devils, being ready to go with thee into the burning furnace of fire and brimstone, though not for sins of so high a nature as thine, trembling say, O that Christ had died for devils, as he died for man! And, O that the gospel had been preached to us as it hath been to thee! How would we have laboured to have closed in with it! But woe be to us, for we might never have it proffered; no, not in the least, though we would have been glad of it. But you, you have it proffered, preached, and proclaimed unto you (Prov 8:4). Besides, you have been intreated, and beseeched to accept of it, but you would not. O simple fools! that might have escaped wrath, vengeance, hell-fire, and that to all eternity, and had no heart at all to do it.

(6.) May not the messengers of Jesus Christ also come in with a shrill and terrible note against thy soul, when thou standest at the bar of God’s justice, saying, Nay, thou ungodly one, how often

hast thou been forewarned of this day? Did we not sound an alarm in thine ears, by the trumpet of God's word day after day? How often didst thou hear us tell thee of these things? Did we not tell thee sin would damn thy soul? Did we not tell thee that without conversion there was no salvation? Did we not tell thee that they who loved their sins should be damned at this dark and gloomy day, as thou art like to be? Yea, did we not tell thee that God, out of his love to sinners, sent Christ to die for them, that they might, by coming to him, be saved? Did not we tell thee of these things? Did we not run, ride, labour, and strive abundantly, if it might have been, for the good of thy soul, though now a damned soul? Did we not venture our goods, our names, our lives? Yea, did we not even kill ourselves with our earnest intreaties of thee to consider of thine estate, and by Christ to escape this dreadful day? O sad doom! When thou shalt be forced full sore against thy will to fall under the truth of this judgment, saying, O 'How have I hated instruction, and *how hath* my heart despised reproof!' for, indeed, 'I have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me' (Prov 5:12, 13).

(7.) May not thy father, thy mother, thy brother, thy sister, thy friend, &c., appear with gladness against thee at the terrible day, saying, O thou silly wretch! how rightly hath God met with thee! O how righteously doth his sentence pass upon thee! Remember thou wouldst not be ruled nor persuaded in thy lifetime. As thou didst not care for us and our admonitions then, so neither do we care for thy ruin, terror, and damnation now. No, but we will stand on God's side in sentencing of thee to that portion which the devils must be partakers of. 'The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance, he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked' (Psa 58:10). O sad! It is enough to make mountains tremble, and the rocks rend in pieces, to hear this doleful sound. Consider these things, and if thou wouldst be loth to be in this condition, then have a care of living in sin now. How loth wilt thou be to be thrust away from the gates of heaven! And how loth wilt thou be to be deprived of the mercy of God! How unwillingly wilt thou set foot forward towards the lake of fire! Never did malefactor so unwillingly turn off the ladder when the halter was about his neck, as thou will turn from God to the devil, from heaven to hell, when the sentence is passed upon thy soul.

O how wilt thou sigh and groan! How willingly wouldst thou hide thyself, and run away from justice! But alas! as it is with them that are on the ladder ready to be executed, so it will be with thee. They would fain run away, but there are many halbert-men to stay them. And so the angels of God will beset thee round, I say round on every side; so that thou mayest indeed look, but run thou canst not. Thou mayest wish thyself under some rock, or mountain (Rev 6:15, 16), but how to get under, thou knowest not.

O how unwilling wilt thou be to let thy father go to heaven without thee! thy mother or friends, &c., go to heaven without thee! How willingly wouldst thou hang on them, and not let them go! O father! cannot you help me? Mother, cannot you do me some good? O how loth am I to burn and fry in hell, while you are singing in heaven! But alas! the father, mother, or friends reject them, slight them, and turn their backs upon them, saying, You would have none of heaven in your lifetime, therefore you shall have none of it now. You slighted our counsels then, and we slight your tears, cries, and condition now. What sayest thou, sinner? Will not this persuade thine heart, nor make thee bethink thyself? This is now before thou fall into that dreadful place, that fiery furnace. But O consider how dreadful the place itself, the devils themselves, the fire itself will be! And this at the end of all, Here thou must lie for ever! Here thou must fry for ever, and for ever! This will be more to thee than any man with tongue can express, or with pen can write. There is none that can, I say, by the ten thousandth part, discover the state and condition of such a soul.

I shall conclude this, then, with A FEW CONSIDERATIONS OF ENCOURAGEMENT.

[*First Encouragement.*] Consider, for I would fain have thee come in, sinner, that there is way made by Jesus Christ for them that are under the curse of God, to come to this comfortable and blessed state of Lazarus I was speaking of. See Ephesians 2.

[*Second Encouragement.*] Consider what pains Christ Jesus took for the ransoming of thy soul from all the curses, thunder-claps, and tempests of the law; from all the intolerable flames of hell; from that soul-sinking appearance of thy person, on the left hand, before the judgment-seat of Christ Jesus, from everlasting fellowship, with innumerable companies of yelling and soul-amazing devils, I say, consider what pains the Lord Jesus Christ took in bringing in redemption for sinners from these things.

‘In that though he was rich, yet he became poor, that ye, through his poverty, might be’ made ‘rich’ (2 Cor 8:9). He laid aside his glory (John 17), and became a servant (Phil 2:7). He left the company of angels, and encountered with the devil (Luke 4; Matt 4). He left heaven’s ease for a time, to lie upon hard mountains (Luke 6:12; John 8:1). In a word, he became poorer than they that go with flail and rake; yea, than the very birds or foxes, and all to do thee good. Besides, consider a little of these unspeakable and intolerable slights and rejections, and the manifold abuses that came from men upon him. How he was falsely accused, being a sweet, harmless, and undefiled lamb. How he was undervalued, so that a murderer was counted less worthy of condemnation than he. Besides, how they mocked him, spit on him, beat him over the head with staves, had the hair plucked from his cheeks. ‘I gave my back to the smiters,’ saith he, ‘and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting’ (Isa 50:6). His head crowned with thorns, his hands pierced with nails, and his side with a spear; together with how they used him, scourged him, and so miserably misusing him, that they had even spent him in a great measure before they did crucify him; insomuch that there was another fain to carry his cross. Again,

[*Third Encouragement.*] Not only this, but lay to heart a little what he received from God, his dear Father, though he were his dear and tender Son.

1. In that he did reckon him the greatest sinner and rebel in the world. For he laid the sins of thousands, and ten thousands, and thousands of thousands of sinners to his charge (Isa 53). And caused him to drink the terrible cup that was due to them all; and not only so, but did delight in so doing. ‘For it pleased the LORD to bruise him.’ God dealt indeed with his son, as Abraham would have deal with Isaac; ay, and more terribly by ten thousand parts. For he did not only tear his body like a lion, but made his soul an offering for sin. And this was not done feignedly, but really-for justice called for it, he standing in the room of sinners. Witness that horrible and unspeakable agony that fell on him suddenly in the garden, as if all the vials of God’s unspeakable scalding vengeance had been cast upon him all at once, and all the devils in hell had broken loose from thence at once to destroy him, and that for ever; insomuch that the very pangs of death seized upon him in the same hour. For, saith he, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful’ and ‘sore amazed,’ even ‘unto death’ (Mark 14:34).

2. Witness also that strange kind of sweat that trickled down his most blessed face, where it is said: ‘And he sweat, as it were, great drops’ or clodders ‘of blood,’ trickling ‘down to the ground.’ O Lord Jesus! what a load didst thou carry! What a burden didst thou bear of the sins of the world, and the wrath of God! O thou didst not only bleed at nose and mouth with the pressure that lay upon thee, but thou wast so pressed, so loaden, that the pure blood gushed through the flesh and skin, and so ran trickling down to the ground. ‘And his sweat was as it were great drops of blood,’ trickling or ‘falling down to the ground’ (Luke 22:44). Canst thou read this, O thou wicked sinner, and yet go on in sin? Canst thou think of this, and defer repentance one hour longer? O heart of

flint! yea, harder. O miserable wretch! What place in hell will be hot enough for thee to have thy soul put into, if thou shalt persist or go on still to add iniquity to iniquity.

3. Besides, his soul went down to hell, and his body to the bars of the grave (Psa 16:10; Acts 2:31). And had hell, death, or the grave, been strong enough to hold him, then he had suffered the vengeance of eternal fire to all eternity. But, O blessed Jesus! how didst thou discover thy love to man in thy thus suffering! And, O God the Father! how didst thou also declare thy purity and exactness of thy justice, in that, though it was thine only, holy, innocent, harmless, and undefiled Son Jesus, that did take on him our nature, and represent our persons, answering for our sins, instead of ourselves! Thou didst so wonderfully pour out thy wrath upon him, to the making of him cry out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' And, O Lord Jesus! what a glorious conquest hast thou made over the enemies of our souls, even wrath, sin, death, hell, and devils, in that thou didst wring thyself from under the power of them all! And not only so, but hast led them captive which would have led us captive; and also hast received for us that glorious and unspeakable inheritance that 'eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man' to conceive; and also hast given thine some discovery thereof through thy Spirit.

And now, sinner, together with this consider,

4. That though Jesus Christ hath done all these things for sinners, yet the devils make it their whole work, and continually study how they may keep thee and others from enjoying of these blessed privileges that have been thus obtained for sinners by this sweet Jesus. He labours, I say, (1.) To keep thee ignorant of thy state by nature. (2.) To harden thy heart against the ways of God. (3.) To inflame thy heart with love to sin and the ways of darkness. And, (4.) To get thee to continue herein. For that is the way, he knows, to get thee to be a partaker with him of flaming hell-fire, even the same that he himself is fallen into, together with the rest of the wicked world, by reason of sin. Look to it therefore.

[*Fourth Encouragement.*] But now, in the next place, *a word of encouragement to you that are the saints of the Lord.*

1. Consider what a happy state thou art in that hast gotten the faith of the Lord Jesus into thy soul; but be sure thou have it, I say, how safe, how sure, how happy art thou! For when others go to hell, thou must go to heaven; when others go to the devil, thou must go to God; when as others go to prison, thou must be set at liberty, at ease, and at freedom; when others must roar for sorrow of heart, then thou shalt also sing for the joy of heart.

2. Consider thou must have all thy well-spent life to follow thee instead of all thy sins and the glorious blessings of the gospel instead of the dreadful curses and condemnations of the law; the blessing of the father, instead of a fiery sentence from the judge.

3. Let dissolution come when it will, it can do thee no harm; for it will be but only a passage out of a prison into a palace; out of a sea of troubles into a haven of rest; out of a crowd of enemies, to an innumerable company of true, loving, and faithful friends; out of shame, reproach, and contempt, into exceeding great and eternal glory. For death shall not hurt thee with his sting, nor bite thee with his soul-murdering teeth; but shall be a welcome guest to thee, even to thy soul, in that it is sent to free thee from thy troubles which thou art in whilst here in this world dwelling in the tabernacle of clay.

4. Consider however it goes with friends and relations, yet it will go well with thee (Eccl 8:12). However it goes with the wicked, yet 'surely I know'; mark, 'yet surely I know,' saith he, 'that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him.' And therefore let this,

(1.) In the first place, cause thee cheerfully to exercise thy patience under all the calamities, crosses, troubles, and afflictions that may come upon thee; and, by patient continuance in well-

doing, to commit both thyself and thine affairs and actions into the hands of God, through Jesus Christ, as to a faithful Creator, who is true in his word, and loveth to give unto thee whatsoever he hath promised to thee.

(2.) And, therefore, to encourage thee while thou art here with comfort to hold on for all thy crosses in this thy journey, be much in considering the place that thou must go into so soon as dissolution comes. It must be into heaven, to God the judge of all, to an innumerable company of angels, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to the general assembly and church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven, and to Jesus, to the redeemer, who is the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaks better things for thee than Abel's did for Cain (Heb 11:22–24).

(3.) Consider that when the time of the dead that they shall be raised is come, then shall thy body be raised out of the grave and be glorified, and be made like to Jesus Christ (Phil 3:21). O excellent condition!

(4.) When Jesus Christ shall sit on the throne of his glory you also shall sit with him, even when he shall sit on the throne of his glory. O will not this be glorious, that when thousands, and thousands of thousands shall be arraigned before the judgment-seat of Christ, then for them to sit with him upon the throne, together with him to pass the sentence upon the ungodly (1 Cor 6:2, 3). Will it not be glorious to enjoy those things that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man to conceive?

Will it not be glorious to have this sentence, 'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world?' Will it not be glorious to enter then with the angels and saints into that glorious kingdom? Will it not be glorious for thee to be in glory with them, while others are in unutterable torments? O then, how will it comfort thee to see thou hast not lost that glory; to think that the devil hath not got thy soul, that thy soul should be saved, and that not from a little, but from an exceeding danger; not with a little, but a great salvation. O, therefore, let the saints be joyful in glory, let them triumph over all their enemies. Let them begin to sing heaven upon earth, triumph before they come to glory, salvation, even when they are in the midst of their enemies, for 'this honour have all his saints' (Psa 149:9).¹

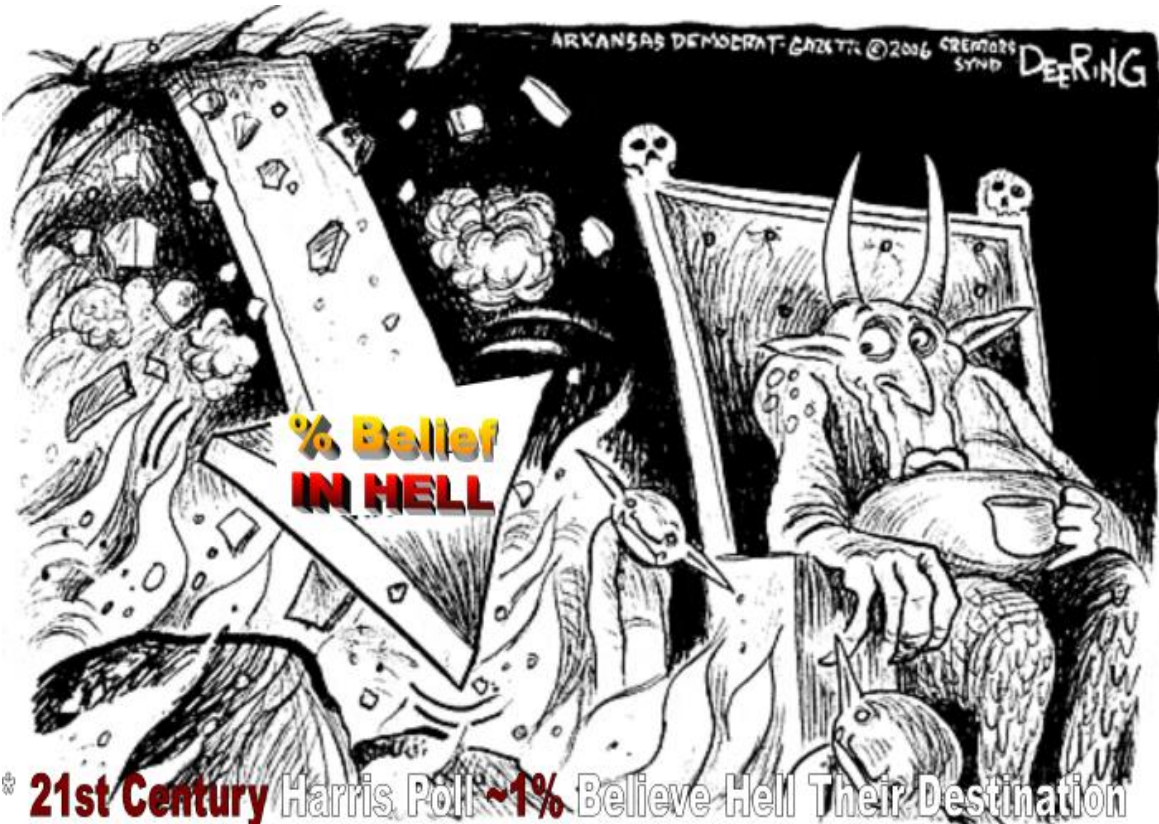
¹ Bunyan, J. (2006). [*Some Sighs from Hell*](#) (Vol. 3, pp. 702–724). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

Leading Captivity Captive: Bible Case Study: The Modern Man

IOWA POLL FINDINGS:

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Going To End Up In Heaven: | 65% |
| Going To End Up In Hell: | 5% |
| Not Sure Or No Opinion: | 30% |
| Know Other Going To Hell: | 31% |

goodsalt.com



**THE FEAR OF
DEATH HAS NOW
REPLACED THE
FEAR OF HELL**

*** To Miss Heaven Is Life's Greatest Failure!**



DEATH is the second most common fear among people, while the first is FAILURE.

 /didyouknowpage1  @didyouknowpage

IDEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Ideological Development: Idolatrous Religion

Afterlife Glossary Of Synonymous Terminology:

- **“Sheol”** - Of Ancient O. T. Hebrew Language
- **“Gehenna”** - Of Ancient N. T. Jewish Location
- **“Hades”** - Of Classical Greek Myth In Origin
- **“Inferno”** - Of Roman Myth & Latin Language
- **“Hell”** - Of German Celtic & Teutonic Origin

Ideological Development: The Greek Hell

- Greek Stoicism Suggested First - Final Human Event - Fire Extinction
- The Greeks believed in Hades – the Underworld – that was supposedly located merely three yards below the surface of the earth.
- It was a vast cavern, a shadowy realm of the dead – both good or bad. The **Hell Mouth** or entryway was actually physically pinpointed in the Asia Minor Region.
- Homer added to its imagery with the River Styx that winds its way around the world of the dead nine times.
- The ruler of Hades was Pluto and governed it with merciless severity and subjected his unwilling guests to his malevolent & inventive genius in torment and torture – these punishments mostly suited the crime.
- Any Greek who was utterly worthless suffered a fate worse than Hades. They were consigned to the bottomless pit of the lower hell of Tartarus, ruled by Kronos. Here they would suffer eternally.
- In contrast and comparison – Hades became simply that ghostly place for those awaiting an eventual relocation to either the permanent hell or the heavenly Fields of Elysia.
- During that interim – souls in Hades could escape by the transcendent power of love evidenced by those living family and friends left behind.

Ideological Development: The Greek Hell

Socrates – Teacher & Mentor - Plato & Aristotle – Said Of Hell:

“But those who appear to be incurable by reason of their crimes – who have committed many and terrible deeds of sacrilege, murders foul and violent, or the like – such are hurried into Tartarus which is their suitable destiny, and they never come out. Those again who have committed crimes, which, although great, are not irremediable ...these are plunged into Hades, the pains of which they are compelled to undergo for a year -- but at the end of the year the wave casts them forth – mere homicides are borne to the Acherusian Lake, and there they lift up their voices and call upon their victims that they have slain or wronged, to have pity on them, and to be kind to them, and let them come out into the lake. And if they prevail -- then they come forth and cease from their troubles; but if not, they are carried back again into Tartarus & thence into the rivers unceasingly until they obtain mercy from those they have wronged: for that is the sentence inflicted upon them by their judges.”

Ideological Development: The Roman Hell

- Upon death the soul was argued over by both malevolent and benevolent demons; The dead soul was taken by whichever one won the argument about its life's worth.
- The Roman hell was entered via cave mouth and immediately inside this was limbo.
- **Limbo was the region where poor people who had not been buried with all the appropriate rituals had to wait for a hundred years.**
- **Leaving Limbo – the soul could cross the River of Oblivion if one could pay the ferryman the correct fee – funeral service had family place in mouth of deceased.**
- **The ritualized funeral, correctly performed, similarly provided dog food for passage beyond the hell hounds that guarded the gates of the underworld.**
- After crossing this entry dead souls were ushered into the halls of Dis Pater where they were judged as male and female by a supernatural couple.
- Successful candidates left on the right-hand path, that led to the Fortunate Isles; unsuccessful souls took the left-hand path, that led to hell.
- Hell was a triple-walled fortress entered by a huge gate.
- Inside this entry, these unfortunate would encounter three lakes - one of boiling gold – one of freezing lead - one of iron shards.
- Around the lakes edge, demons would be hurling dead into them or tossing souls between them.
- After an extended period that seemed like eternity – the soul would be pounded, to get it back into some sort of shape – for return opportunity of another life on earth.

Ideological Development: The Roman Hell

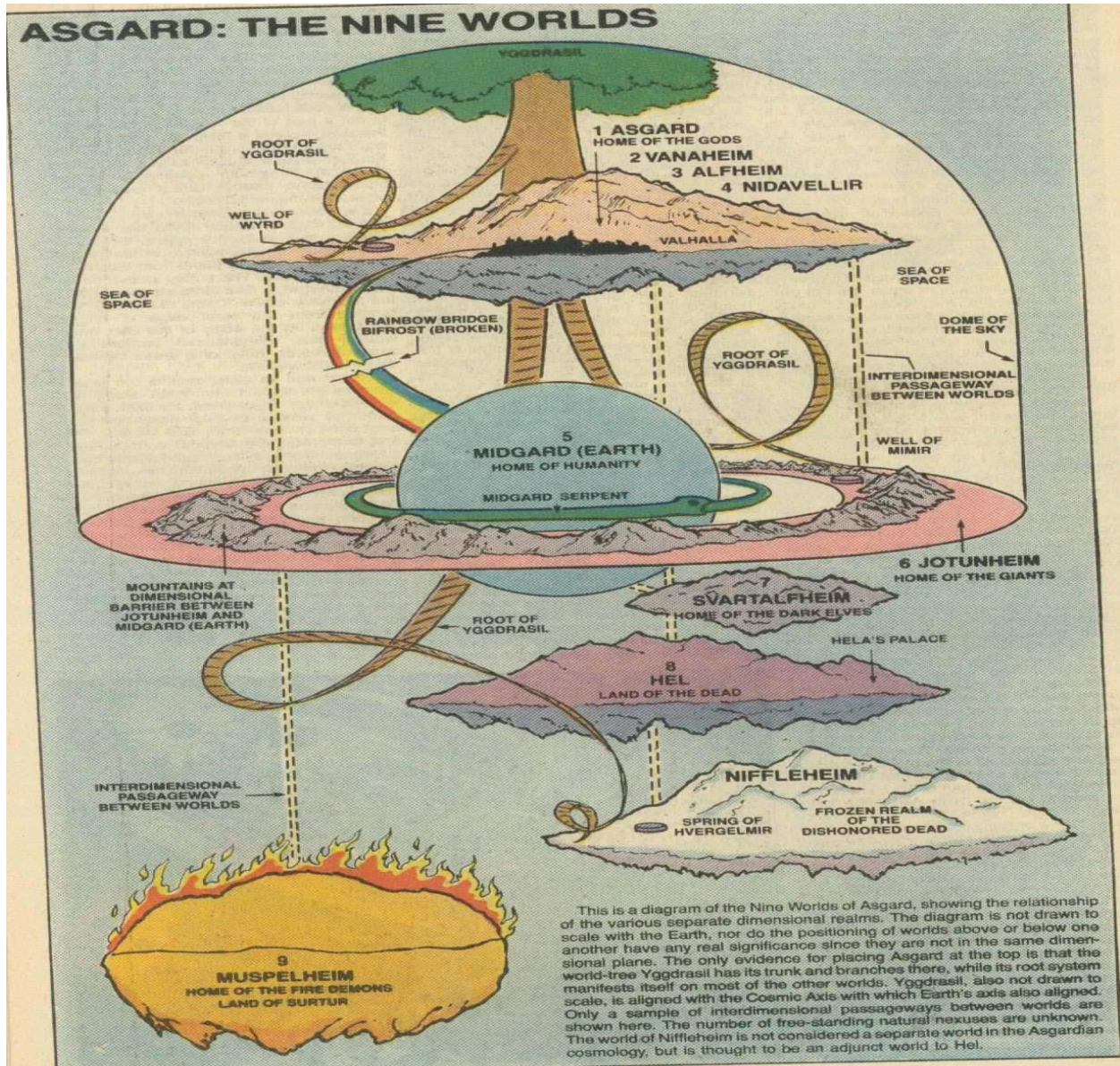
➤ *“THEN STAR NOR SUN SHALL WAKEN,
NOR ANY CHANGE OF LIGHT; NOR
SOUND OF WATER SHAKEN... NOR
ANY SOUND OR SIGHT: NOR WINTRY
LEAVES NOR VERNAL, NOR DAYS NOR
THINGS DIURNAL; ONLY THE SLEEP
ETERNAL - IN AN ETERNAL NIGHT.”*

Garden Of Proserpine

Ideological Development: Astral Eschatology

- ❖ Afterlife Explanations Paralleled:
Bios-Theos-Cosmos Concepts
- ❖ Dual Underworlds Of Heaven & Hell:
Gave way to passing upward through planetary spheres - harmonic heavens not simply layers below earth's crust.
- ❖ Punishment Place According To The Copernican Cosmology - Earth Center;
Heavy Mass Gross Weight - Prevent Flight

Norse Viking & Old World German Afterlife & Underworld MYTHOLOGY



NOTE: The above afterlife mind map highly influenced both Martin Luther's interpretation of God's disapproval as relates to his Thunderstorm Conversion and the Teutonic based German Reformation.

Ideological Development: Christian Religion

➤ Jerome Reported Of Origen's Teachings

- *“Origen’s teaching states that all rational, invisible, non-corporeal creatures [here angels], if they are careless, little by little slide toward the depths. From the matter toward which they descend, they take on airy, ethereal bodies with human flesh. Meanwhile, if the demons, who by their own decision under the Devil’s leadership fell away from the Lord’s service, had just barely come to their senses, they also would be dressed in human flesh, so that, each one having done his penance, they would begin to rise in the same circular movement by which they first entered the flesh and would be returned to nearness to God, whereupon they would shed their airy ethereal bodies. And then all things would kneel to the God of the heavens, the earth & the underworld, and God with us, would be everything.”*

Ideological Development: Christian Religion

Julian Defended Origen Against Augustine:

- **“[God] it is, you say who judges in this way; he is the persecutor of newborn children; he it is who sends tiny babies to eternal flames. It would be right & proper to treat you as beneath argument: you have come so far from religious feeling, from civilized feeling, so far indeed from mere common sense, in that you think that your Lord is capable of committing a crime against justice such as is hardly conceivable even among the barbarians.”**

Ideological Development: Christian Religion

From Christian & Church Persecutions Came Attitude Opposite Origen's Allegoric – Typical Was Tertullian's Revenged Fantasy:

- “What a panorama of spectacle on that day! What sight shall I turn to first to laugh and applaud? Mighty kings whose ascent to heaven used to be announced publicly – groaning now in the depths? Governors who persecuted the name of the Lord melting in flames fiercer than those they kindled for brave Christians? Wise philosophers, blushing before their students as they burn together, the followers to whom they taught that the world is no concern of God's, whom they assured that either they had no souls at all or that what souls they had would never return to their former bodies? Poets, trembling not before the judgment seat of Minos, but of Christ - - a surprise? Tragic actors bellowing in their own melodramas should be worth hearing! Comedians skipping in fire will be worth praise! The famous charioteer will toast on his fiery wheel; the athletes will cartwheel not in the gymnasium but in flames... These are the things of greater delight, I believe, than a circus, both kinds of theatre, and any stadium.”

First Of Hellfire Sermon Type: "Abominable Fantasy"



- **“If there's one wee spark under all those ashes, we'll blow until the whole pile is red and *clear*... The whole difficulty of understanding Hell is that the thing to be understood is so nearly Nothing. But ye'll have had experiences... It begins with a mood.” Lewis, Divorce, pg. 77**

Muting & Mutation: Doctrines Of Hell From Hell

- Early Christians Had The Choice Of Three Purgatory Intercessors: First – John The Baptist & Second – Paul To The Gentiles & Lastly – The Virgin Mary
- Landscape Revisited: From Frightful Folktale Of Menacing Fairyland To – Stinking Mire With Satan As Sardonic “Lord Of Flies”
- Nature Reinterpreted: Jesuit Unified, Figured, & Temporalized - Gnashing Teeth & Undying Worm – Into Present Demonic Activities Among Those Currently Living
- Collaterally: Tortures Were Administered In The Baroque Era Hell By Other Lost Of Life’s Lesser Quality: The Artwork Of This Period Forward Emphasized The Chaotic Nature & The Inescapable Classless Overcrowding
- Historical Motivation: 1) Pressures For Roman Catholic Version Of Protestant Option-Type Model Of High & Low Worship Services In The Same Church; 2) Hypocrisy Of Elite Civil Religionists In Demeanor As Publicly Perceived By Their Spiritual Sponsorships Versus Their Actual Private Worldly Lifestyles
- Conceptual Consequences: The Popular Acceptance Of Purgatory As A Place Had Three Major Results - 1) Church hierarchies reach and power stretched to beyond the grave; 2) Perceived authority for indulgence sales in a sinful futures market; 3) Fears of punishment were replaced with only fear of death!
- Transition From Renaissance To Enlightenment Brought Separation Between Natural Science & Natural Philosophy: Statecraft Became Social Science & Religion Re-examined In Its Emphasis & Imperative
- Reacting To The Ignorance Of Opinions Leaders Of Thought Rejected Inspiration

Muting & Mutation: Doctrines Of Hell From Hell

Enlightenment Writer John Donne On Annihilation Over Retribution:

- *“That the God who, when he could not get into me by standing and knocking, by his ordinary means of entering, by his word, his mercies, hath applied his judgments and hath shaked the house, this body, with agues and palsies, and set this house on fire with fevers and calentures and frightened the master of the house, my soul, with horrors and heavy apprehensions and so made an entrance into me; that that God should loose & frustrate all his own purposes and practices upon me, and leave me, cast me away, as though I had cost him nothing, that this God at last should let this soul go away, as a smoke, as a vapor, as a bubble, and then that this soul cannot be a smoke, nor a vapor, nor a bubble, but must live in darkness; what torment is not a marriage bed to this damnation, to be secluded eternally, eternally, from the sight of God?”*

THE HELL HARROWING

- “The descent motif common to most mythologies about hell also usually contains an element of “harrowing,” or distressing, of hell. This is where a hero or savior has to go to hell and shut it down, or defeat its ruler or bring somebody back... This is what the line in the Apostle’s Creed is about - - ‘He descended into Hell, the third day he arose again from the dead.’ After Jesus had been crucified he went to hell – not to suffer, but to battle with the Devil, whom he defeated. He chained up Satan and cast him into a fiery pit where he was to stay for a thousand years. As well as closing down hell, Jesus rescued Adam & other ancient souls...” Craze, Hell

THE HELL HARROWING

- According to tradition, Jesus closed hell for a thousand years. However, this caused problems for theologians and for believers. If hell is closed what happens to the souls of the wicked? - “The early Christians were obligated to introduce the concept of a sort of waiting room, where souls would stay for the thousand years until hell was open again. They found a ready-made idea – limbo – that they freely borrowed from the Romans, who had borrowed it from the Greeks. This was all fine until the year 1000AD, when Satan’s banishment was supposed to end... But nothing happened. The theologians set to work and said that Satan was now out and about in the world – tempting and tormenting – and that hell was still closed but that there was another place where sinners would be punished. This was purgatory. It was a cross between limbo and hell. But if Satan was absent, who was to run it? Jesus’ mother, the Virgin Mary, was called back from heaven, where she had been asleep (the Dormition). She was given the keys of to look after, & the running of purgatory. She does not administer any punishments – in fact, her main job seems to be protecting the souls of the sinners from the wrath of her son...”

- Richard Craze, Hell, pages 44, 45

Hell, Sheol, Hades, Paradise and the Grave

by W. Edward Bedore, Th.D., Berean Institute

There seems to be some confusion about the meaning of Hell and who goes there because of the way the Hebrew word *Sheol* and the Greek word *Hades* have been translated in our English Bibles. Since this confusion has led some into an erroneous understanding of what the Bible actually teaches about the intermediate state and the final state of the dead, we think that it is important that we address this subject here. *Sheol* is found in the Bible sixty-five times. It is translated “the pit” three times, “the grave” thirty-one times, and “hell” thirty-one times. *Hades* is used eleven times, being rendered “hell” ten times and “grave” once. Adding to the confusion is that two other words are also translated hell in the New Testament. These are *Tartarus*, which is found once and *Gehenna*, which is used twelve times.

The term “Hell” is commonly understood to mean a place of torment where the souls of the wicked go after physical death. This is true. However, because Hades in the New Testament and Sheol in the Old are variously rendered hell or grave, there has been some misunderstanding about what hell and the grave are. Before looking at these words though, we should first give our attention to the Greek word Gehenna, which is always translated hell and used in reference to the Lake of Fire. It is found in Matthew 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 12:5; and James 3:6.

THE FINAL HELL

The Lake of Fire, or Hell, is a literal place of everlasting fire that was originally created by God as a place of punishment for Satan and the angels that followed him in his rebellion against God (Mat. 25:41). Because it is referred to as the place of “*outer darkness*” (Mat. 8:12; 25:30), we believe that it is most probably located at the farthest reaches of the creation. Gehenna is described in Scripture as a “*furnace of fire*” (Mat. 13:42); “*everlasting punishment*” (Mat. 25:46); “*the mist [gloom] of darkness*” (II Pet. 2:17); the “*hurt of the second death*” (Rev. 2:11 cf.

20:6,14; 21:8); *“a lake of fire burning with brimstone”* (Rev. 19:20; 20:10; 21:8).

While Hell was created for Satan and the other fallen angels, the unsaved of humanity from all ages will be with them in this place of torment where *“there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth”* (Mat. 13:42). This is the *“everlasting reward”* of all that die in their sins.

While there is no one in the Lake of Fire at this time, it will one day hold a vast multitude. Finally, the unsaved dead of all ages will be raised and judged at the Great White Throne by Jesus Christ and then cast into the Lake of Fire (see Rev. 20:11-15).

The name Gehenna comes from a deep narrow ravine south of Jerusalem where some Hebrew parents actually sacrificed their children to the Ammonite god, Molech, during the time of the kings (II Kin. 16:3; II Chron. 28:1-3; cf. Lev. 18:21; I Kin. 11:5,7,33). This pagan deity is also referred to as Malcham, Milcom, and Moloch in the Bible. This valley later served as the city dump and, because there was continual burning of refuse there, it became a graphic symbol of the place of punishment for the wicked. It was named the *“Valley of Hinnom,”* which translated into Greek becomes Gehenna. The passages where the word is found in the New Testament plainly show that it was a commonly used expression for Hell by that time. The word is found twelve times in the Scriptures, being used eleven times by the Lord Jesus and once by James. When we consider the context, it is clear the Lord used this word in reference to the place of everlasting punishment for the wicked dead and not to the city dump.

Gehenna, or the Lake of Fire, might be referred to as the future, or final, Hell because it is where all of the wicked from all ages will finally end up. Satan, the fallen angels, and all of the lost of mankind will reside in torment there forever and ever.

SHEOL/HADES: THE PRESENT HELL

Scripture passages in which Gehenna is used should be distinguished from those using Hades, which refers to a place of temporary torment that we might refer to as the immediate, or present, Hell. What we mean

by this is that, at the time of death, the souls of the lost go directly to Hades, where they suffer in torment until the time of the Great White Throne Judgment when they will be resurrected and cast into the Lake of Fire. The souls of all the lost who have already died are presently there and those who die in their sins immediately go there to join them.

Hades is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament word Sheol. The Greek and Hebrew words speak of the same place, the present Hell. However, this is problematic because Sheol has been translated “grave” as often as it has “hell” and some have mistakenly taught that Sheol and Hades are only references to the grave rather than Hell. This erroneous teaching leads to the denial of the existence of an immediate or present Hell. The false doctrine of soul-sleep, and other ideas that teach the unconscious state of the dead between death and resurrection, spring from this error.

The common word for “grave” in the Old Testament is *queber*. Of the sixty-four times it is used, it is translated “grave” thirty-four times, “sepulcher” twenty-six times, and “burying place” four times. *Queber* is used five additional times as part of a place name, Kibroth-hattaavah, which means “graves of lust.” As we said earlier, Sheol is found sixty-four times, being rendered “grave” thirty-one times, “hell” thirty-one times, and “pit” three times.

A comparison of how *Sheol* and *queber* are used reveals eight points of contrast that tell us that they are not the same thing.

1. *Sheol* is never used in plural form. *Queber* is used in the plural 29 times.
2. It is never said that the body goes to *Sheol*. *Queber* speaks of the body going there 37 times.
3. *Sheol* is never said to be located on the face of the earth. *Queber* is mentioned 32 times as being located on the earth.
4. An individual’s *Sheol* is never mentioned. An individual’s *queber* is mentioned 5 times.
5. Man is never said to put anyone into *Sheol*. Individuals are put into a *queber* by man (33 times).

6. Man is never said to have dug or fashioned a *Sheol*. Man is said to have dug, or fashioned, a *queber* (6 times).
7. Man is never said to have touched *Sheol*. Man touches, or can touch, a *queber* (5 times).
8. It is never said that man is able to possess a *Sheol*. Man is spoken of as being able to possess a *queber* (7 times). (These eight points of comparison are adapted from “*Life and Death*” by Caleb J. Baker, *Bible Institute Colportage Ass’n*, 1941).

From the differences between how *Sheol* and *queber* are used in Scripture, it is obvious that they are not the same thing. The Greek word *Hades* in the New Testament would fit into the *Sheol* column of our chart, strongly indicating that it is the same thing as *Sheol*. *Hades* is used eleven times, being rendered Hell ten times and grave once.

Words associated with *queber* are *quabar* and *qeburah*. *Quabar* is a verb meaning to bury or to be buried and *qeburah* is a noun meaning a grave or place of burial. The use of these related words helps to reinforce the difference between *queber* and *Sheol*, as they clearly have to do with the grave as a burial place, while *Sheol* does not.

EXAMPLES SHOWING THAT SHEOL IS NOT A BURIAL PLACE

1. After selling Joseph into slavery, his brothers stained his coat with blood and used it to convince their father that he had been killed by a wild animal (Gen. 37:26-36). Jacob’s sons and daughters tried “*to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, ‘for I will go down into the grave (Sheol) unto my son mourning’. Thus his father wept for him*” (v. 35).

From Jacob’s words it is clear that he fully intended to eventually be reunited with his son in a tangible way. Obviously then, he did not simply have in mind the idea of joining him in burial as he believed that Joseph’s body had not been buried at all, but was eaten by an animal (v. 33). This being the case, it was impossible for Jacob to think he would join Joseph in burial. Obviously, he looked forward to being reunited with him in the place of the departed dead, not in burial. The word rendered grave in this passage is *Sheol*, the abode of the souls of those who have died.

2. After Jacob died, Joseph had his body mummified, a process that took forty days, then took him back to Canaan for burial (Gen. 50:1-14). When we add to that the thirty days of mourning (Gen. 50:2-4), and the time it took to travel to Canaan for the funeral (Gen. 50:5-13), we see that it was several weeks after Jacob was "*gathered unto his people*" (Gen. 49:33) before his body was placed in the cave that served as his burial place. Considering that he had been dead for well over two months before his body was buried and that the Scriptures state that at the time he died he was "*gathered to his people*" (Gen. 49:33) is telling. This shows that at the time of physical death, when "*he yielded up the spirit,*" his soul immediately departed his body to be with Isaac and Abraham. This cannot be a reference to his body being gathered together with their bodies, as that did not take place for over ten weeks. This is strong proof that Sheol does not mean a burial place for the body, but is the place where the souls of the departed reside.

3. That communication takes place in Sheol/Hades tells us that something other than a burial place is in view. In Isaiah 14:4-20, we find the prophet foretelling the eventual defeat and death of the king of Babylon. The nation that would eventually send Judah into captivity will itself be defeated and its mighty king will find himself among "*the chief ones of the earth...the kings of the nations*" (Isa. 14:9) who preceded him in death. These are the kings of nations that he had conquered with the sword and ruled over with a cruel hand (Isa. 14:6). These same men will serve as a welcoming committee for this once great "world ruler" when he arrives in Sheol/Hades. In mock surprise, they will ask this once powerful king, "*Art thou also become weak as we? Are thou become like unto us?*" (Isa. 14:10). They then taunt him by pointing out that the pretentious display of magnificence that he had demonstrated as the king of Babylon now meant nothing (Isa. 14:11).

All of those who find themselves in this section of Sheol/Hades, like the king of Babylon and the kings who greeted him, will be faced with the reality of how helpless and hopeless they are. One of the boasts these kings make against him is that, while their bodies have been placed in their respective tombs, or graves, he was not honored by a respectable burial, "*But thou are cast out of the grave (queber) like an abominable (despised) branch...thou shalt not be joined with them in*

burial" (Isa. 14:18-20). Obviously, if his body was not in any grave at all, he was not simply joining them in burial.

What we see here is this man going into Sheol, while at the same time his body is cast out of its grave. Obviously then, Sheol cannot be the grave here as the body and soul are in different places, the soul going to Sheol while the body remains unburied, or outside of the grave (vs. 20) to be infested by maggots (vs. 11). It is true that this is a prophetic passage; and there are various opinions as to the identity of the person in view here (verses 12-15 are commonly thought to refer to Satan, the power behind the Gentile kings). But, regardless of who this prophecy is about, or whether it has already been fulfilled or not, does not change the fact that Sheol and the grave are to be regarded as different places in this passage of Scripture.

4. In the case of Samuel and Saul, we find another example of the Scriptures making a distinction between Sheol/Hades and the grave. In his conversation with King Saul, Samuel, whom the Lord had sent back from the dead to deliver a message to Saul, said that Saul and his sons would be with him the next day (see I Sam. 28:15-19). As foretold, Saul and his sons did die the next day while in battle with the Philistines (see I Sam. 31:1-6). However, their bodies were not buried the next day, so they did not join Samuel in the grave but their souls went down to Sheol/Hades where the person, or soul, of Samuel was. As it is said that Samuel "came up" it seems obvious that he went back down after speaking with Saul (I Sam. 28:8,11,14). As for the bodies of Saul and his sons, their remains were not buried for several days. As Samuel had said, they died the next day (I Sam. 31:1-6). But it was the day after they died that their bodies were taken by the Philistines and hung on the wall of Beth-Shan (I Sam. 31:7-10). After hearing of this, valiant men from Jabesh-Gilead went by night and removed their bodies, took them to Jabesh, burned them, and then buried their bones. All this took place at least three days after Saul had died, and probably longer. Saul and his sons joined Samuel in Sheol/Hades the day they died and the flesh of their bodies was burned with only their bones being placed in a grave several days later. Obviously Sheol/Hades and the grave are not the same thing, nor are they in the same place.

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus that is found in Luke 16:19-31 gives us the record of a remarkable conversation that took place in Hades between the Rich Man and Abraham. Obviously, these two men could not have had this conversation at all if Sheol/Hades is only a place where dead bodies are buried. First, there could be no communication between lifeless, decaying corpses and second, Abraham's body, which was buried in the cave of Machpelah over 1800 years earlier, had long since decayed. Also, the rich man's body, regardless of whether it had decayed or not, would not have been buried in the burial cave of Abraham. From the context, it is obvious that these men were in the place of departed souls rather than a burial place.

There are some that contend that this is a parable that never actually took place and deny that it could have ever taken place. To these, who usually hold to a position of soul-sleep or the eradication of the soul at death, we answer; **the Lord said that it did take place.** Besides, as we have already pointed out, a parable by definition is a "true to life" story. To have meaning, it must be a story that could have actually taken place whether it ever did or not.

DEATH AND SHEOL

Death and Sheol/Hades are linked together at least thirty-three times in the Scriptures. In these, we see a general distinction between the "outward man," which is the body and the "inward man," which is the soul (cf. II Cor. 4:16). In this sense, death, or the grave, claims the physical part of man, the body, while Sheol/Hades claims the separated, spiritual part of man, the soul. This is exactly the meaning of Psalm 16:10: *"For Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell (Sheol); neither will Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption."* In his Pentecostal address, Peter left no room for doubt that this was a prophetic pronouncement concerning the time between the Lord Jesus Christ's death on the Cross and His resurrection. First, he quoted Psalm 16:8-11 (Acts 2:25-28) and then made direct application of verse 10 to Christ (Acts 2:31). Not only was the Lord Jesus' soul not left in Sheol/Hades, but neither was His

body left to rot in the grave. That Peter used Hades, the place of Sheol, in this quotation shows that they are identical in meaning.

Of course, the Lord Jesus Christ is exceptional because He had the power not only to lay down His life on our behalf, but also to take it up again (Jn. 10:17,18). This is not so of any other man, as the Psalmist points out when he asks, rhetorically, *“What man is he that liveth and shall not see death? Shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave (Sheol)?”* (Ps. 89:48). Because of the curse of sin, all of mankind faces the reality of physical death. None can evade it by their own power, nor can any man or woman escape from Sheol/Hades on their own. We know that since the Cross the souls of those who die “in Christ” do not go to Sheol/Hades, but to heaven. However, this is through the merit of Jesus Christ and His power, not their own. For those “in Christ,” death has no sting and Sheol/Hades has no victory because their body and soul will be united in a resurrection unto life (see I Cor. 15:19,20,51-57). This is as certain as the fact of Jesus Christ’s resurrection. This is not so for those who die without Christ for they face a resurrection unto judgment, which is referred to as the *“second death”* (Rev. 20:13,14; 21:8).

Psalm 89:48 speaks of the time when the soul is separated from the body. The body is given over to death where it will decay, while the soul is assigned to Sheol/Hades to await the final judgment. It is clear that the body and soul of the lost will be reunited at the time of the Great White Throne Judgment of the unsaved dead, when *“death and Hades”* will deliver up the dead that are in them. That is, their bodies will be raised from the grave, or death, and reunited with the soul, which will come out of Sheol/Hades to be judged by Jesus Christ at the Great White Throne (see Rev. 20:11-15; cf. Jn. 5:28,29).

When the Lord Jesus said that *“as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* (Mat. 12:40), He was saying that He would spend the time between His death and resurrection in Sheol/Hades. We know from Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:25-32 that the Lord’s soul, which was made an offering for sin (Isa. 53:10), was in Sheol/Hades, and we know from Matthew 12:40 that He was in the heart of the earth, which is where we believe that Sheol/Hades is located.

When we speak of the heart of something, we are not referring to that which is superficial or only skin-deep. Symbolically, the heart signifies the innermost character, feelings, or inclinations of a man. The heart is also used when referring to the center, or core, of something. For example; it is sometimes said, “the heart of a watermelon is the best part,” meaning that the center part of the watermelon tastes better than the part closer to the rind. If we say that we have a “heart-felt desire” for a particular area of ministry, we would be speaking of a yearning to do the Lord’s work that comes from our innermost being as opposed to a superficial desire based on the emotions of the moment. When used figuratively in the Scriptures, the word “heart” is used in a similar fashion, thus the heart of the earth gives reference to something much deeper than a simple place of burial for a man’s body barely under the surface of the earth. That it is said that before His ascension the Lord Jesus first descended “*into the lower parts of the earth*” (Eph. 4:9) affirms this. In a Psalm of thanksgiving for being delivered from death, David makes reference to this by distinguishing between Sheol/Hades (rendered grave in the KJV) and Queber (rendered pit in this passage) (Ps. 30:1-3).

In Ezekiel we find prophecies against the kings of Assyria (Ezek. 31) and Egypt (Ezek. 32) that indicate that Sheol/Hades is in the center of the earth. In these two chapters it speaks of the fall of these mighty kings, who in death ended up in the underworld with those who have gone before them. We do not have the space here to give extensive commentary on these two chapters. But we do want to point out that in regard to both kings it is said that in death they would go “*to the nether parts of the earth...with them that go down into the pit*” (see Ezekiel 31:14,16,18; 32:18,24), the “*nether parts*” being the lower regions of the earth. We should take note that in chapter thirty-one it is being pointed out to Pharaoh that just as the king of Assyria, who was greater than he was, had died and gone into the underworld, so would he.

In chapter 32 we find a prophecy, given in the form of a lamentation, foretelling Pharaoh’s defeat by the king of Babylon (Ezekiel 32:1-16). This is followed by a lamentation over the multitude of Egyptians who would be slain by the Babylonians (Ezek. 31:17-31). We have pictured for us those of the nations who preceded them, welcoming Pharaoh and

his host as they arrived in Sheol/Hades by taunting them. They point out that the Egyptians had thought themselves to be invincible because of their strength and fame among the nations. But now they were just like the great nations who had gone before them, their individual souls being confined to Sheol/Hades while their bodies decay in the grave.

“The strong among the mighty shall speak to him out of the midst of hell (Sheol)...” (Ezek. 32:21). The “strong among the mighty” spoken of here refers to the men who had been the kings and leaders of the different nations that are mentioned in this passage: Asshor, or Assyria (v. 22), Elam (v. 24), Meshech and Tubal (v. 26), Edom, her kings and her princes (v. 29), the princes of the north and the Zidonians (v. 30). This passage shows that while those of each group mentioned are in their respective burial places, their *quebers*, they are at the same time all together in “the pit,” which is an expression that is sometimes used for Sheol/Hades (vv. 18,25,29). These are similar examples as that found in Isaiah 14, which we have previously looked at.

While we have not exhausted the subject by looking at every passage that Sheol is found in, it is clear from these examples that Sheol is not simply the grave but is located at the center of the earth and is the abode of the souls of the unrighteous dead who are awaiting their resurrection unto condemnation. It is equally clear that those in Sheol/Hades are not in an unconscious state of existence but are quite aware of what is going on around them. There is memory, recognition & communication there.

TARTARUS

The Apostle Peter used the word *Tartarus* in reference to “*the angels that sinned*” that God delivered to Sheol/Hades to await judgment (II Pet. 2:4). This word, which is translated “hell” in the KJV, was used in Greek mythology to refer to the place of punishment for the most wicked. It is not clear if Peter was using this word in reference to Sheol/Hades in a general way or if he was referring to a specific compartment of Sheol/Hades where a certain class of fallen angels are confined awaiting final judgment. Either way, this passage teaches that there is a place of confinement in which a particular group of beings are being held until

the time of their judgment. This is consistent with the overall Biblical teaching about the existence and purpose of Sheol/Hades.

PARADISE

While Paradise is not now a part of Sheol/Hades it will be mentioned here because it was located in Sheol/Hades at one time. Before the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ everybody who died went to Sheol/Hades, which was at that time divided into at least two compartments. One was a place of torment while the other was a place of blessing, which was referred to as Abraham's Bosom (Lk. 16:22-25). As we mentioned before, Tartarus may be a specific place in Sheol/Hades.

We know that Jesus Christ went "*into the lower parts of the earth*" (Eph. 4:9), that is to Sheol/Hades, "in the heart of the earth," for three days and nights while his body was in the grave (Mat. 12:40). The Lord Jesus told the repentant thief that he would join Him in Paradise that same day (Lk. 23:42,43). This tells us that Paradise was located in Sheol/Hades at that time. We believe that this was the same place referred to as Abraham's Bosom in Luke 16. However, after Jesus Christ rose from the dead He ascended to the Father, taking the saints who were in Abraham's Bosom to heaven with Him. Thus, He took "*captivity captive*" (see Eph. 4:8-10). That Paradise was moved to heaven is confirmed to us by the Apostle Paul who speaks of a man who was "*caught up into Paradise*" where he "*heard unspeakable words*" (II Cor. 12:3,4). With Jesus Christ's work complete, the believers who had been confined to Sheol/Hades were now taken to Heaven to wait in God's presence until the time of their resurrection to enter His Kingdom on Earth. Since that time, at death all believers go to Paradise in Heaven to await the time of their resurrection. This is true whether they belong to the Kingdom Church of the future or the Body of Christ Church of the present Dispensation of Grace.

THE GRAVE

We have already looked at the word *queber*, the most common word for grave, or a burial place, in the Old Testament, and have shown that it is

not the same as Sheol. As previously stated, of the sixty-four times it is used it is rendered “grave” thirty-four times, “sepulcher” twenty-six times, and “burying place” four times. Two other words that are used for a burial place in the Old Testament are *Shah-ghath* and *Qeburah*.

Shah-ghath: This word is translated “grave” once (Job 33:22). It is rendered “ditch” twice, “destruction” twice, “corruption” four times, and “pit” thirteen times. This word speaks of something that man can dig (Ps. 94:13; Prov. 26:27) and is used in reference to a hole into which a man can fall (Ps. 7:15; Prov. 26:27), and a hole used as a trap (Ps. 35:7). It is a place where the physical body suffers destruction through the corruption of decay (Ps. 16:10; 49:9; 55:23). The basic meaning is that of a hole of some kind that man digs for a particular purpose. Generally, it is used of a burial place, i.e., a grave.

Qeburah: This word is related to *queber* and means a grave or burial place. It is used of various types of graves and is found fourteen times and is translated “grave” four times, “sepulcher” five times, “burial” four times, and “burying place” one time.

In the New Testament we find three more words that refer to the grave, *taphos*, *mnema*, and *mnemeion*. *Taphos* is used seven times and is translated “sepulcher” six of those and “tomb” once. *Mnema* is used seven times, being rendered “tomb” twice, “grave” once, and “sepulcher” four times. *Mnemeion* is the most common word for grave in the New Testament. It is used forty-two times, five times as “tomb,” twenty-nine times as “sepulcher,” and eight times as “grave.”

The grave is a place where the physical remains of those who have died are deposited. It can be a hole in the ground, a cave, or a specially prepared vault or other place used for interment. The soul and spirit having departed the body at death, there is no consciousness of life in the grave. It is a place of corruption that serves to point out man’s need of a Savior. The soul of man lives on after physical death and will always remain in a conscious state of being. The unsaved go to Sheol/Hades to await their resurrection unto condemnation while the redeemed go to heaven to await their resurrection unto life (see Jn. 5:25-29).

HELL: BIBLE STUDENTS DEBATE FOUR VIEWS

TWO VIEWS OF HELL PERMANENT

THE LITERAL VIEW

John F. Walvoord

PROBLEMS IN THE CONCEPT OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

Most Christians have natural problems with the concept of eternal punishment. In their study of Scripture they have been instructed from the pulpit on a loving Savior who died on the cross for our sins, rose again, and provides grace and forgiveness for all who put their trust in him. Many Christians will hear hundreds of sermons on this theme in their lifetime. On the contrary, they will probably never hear a sermon on hell, though they may hear some allusions to it from time to time. Almost immediately problems arise. What about those who live and die without ever hearing the gospel? Are they doomed to eternal punishment? Is a religious Jew or a religious Muslim who carefully follows his religion doomed to eternal punishment? How can one harmonize the concept of a loving, gracious God with a God who is righteous and unforgiving? These are very real problems that naturally call for solution.

The concept of hell as eternal punishment has long been caricatured as a relic of the Dark Ages. For many, the proper doctrine is that of a loving God who will not demand everlasting retribution. Frequently the subject is approached critically, and there is an obvious unwillingness to deal directly with the biblical evidence. In fact, some openly say that if the Bible teaches eternal punishment, they do not believe it even though it is in the Bible.

For those who believe in the genuineness of biblical revelation and accept the inerrancy of Scripture, the problem is one of understanding what Scripture teaches. Such people consider the Bible as the norm and standard for harmonizing the concept of divine, inexorable righteousness with the concept of God's infinite love. Those who deny scriptural inerrancy naturally have no problem in supporting the idea that eternal punishment does not exist. But even the most ardent advocates of eternal punishment must confess shrinking from the idea of hell as continuing forever. It is only natural to harbor the hope that such suffering may be somehow terminated. The problem for all is to comprehend the infinite righteousness of God that must judge those who have not received grace. The human mind is incapable of comprehending

an infinite righteousness and must bow to the Scriptures and their interpretation when directly and faithfully set forth.

The Bible also teaches about eternal heaven; few have problems with this concept if they accept the Bible testimony. The problem is how to harmonize an eternal heaven with that of eternal punishment.

VARIOUS VIEWS

The doctrine of hell is a feature of divine revelation in Scripture and has been discussed at length in theology. The Bible clearly teaches that there is life after this life both for those who are qualified for blessing and for those qualified for judgment. The slow unfolding of this doctrine in Scripture, however, has given rise to a number of views on the subject.

First, the *orthodox* view is commonly interpreted to be the belief that punishment for the wicked is everlasting and that it is punitive, not redemptive. Because the Bible reveals that God is a God of love and grace, a tension has developed between the concepts of a loving God and of a righteous God who demands absolute justice of the wicked. It is generally conceded, however, that a strict orthodoxy provides a literal everlasting punishment for the wicked.

Second, a view of hell as *metaphorical*, that is, somewhat nonliteral and less specific than the orthodox view, has also attracted many followers. Usually it is conceded that those who are wicked will never be redeemed and restored to a place of blessing in eternity, but the scriptural accounts of their suffering and divine judgment are taken in a less-than-literal understanding.

A third view—that of the Roman Catholic Church—sees hell as *purgatorial*; that is, hell has an ante-chamber called purgatory, a place of divine cleansing from which some, at least, will eventually emerge as redeemed and be among the blessed of God. Generally speaking, this view requires that all must go through a period of purgation in which their unconfessed sins are judged and punishment inflicted. Though it may be extensive and continue over a period of time, ultimately, many will be restored to a place of grace and bliss, though others will be damned eternally.

Fourth, the view of hell as a *conditional* or temporary situation for the wicked has been advocated by many who find a contradiction between the doctrines of everlasting punishment and of a God of love and grace. As a result, they explain that hell is either temporary, in the sense that immortality is conditional and only the righteous will be raised, or that it is redemptive, in the sense that whatever suffering there may be after this life because of sin will end up in the wicked being redeemed and restored to a place of blessing. In other words, conditional immortality or annihilation lessens the severity and the extent of everlasting punishment, while in universalism, all are eventually saved.

Obviously, if hell lasts forever, these views cannot be correct, and the general tradition of the orthodox church and those who follow Scripture strictly view hell as a punishment that is everlasting for those who are not Christians or rightly related to God. Variations in understanding the duration and extent of everlasting punishment have occupied Jewish and Christian theologians for centuries, including some Jewish theologians before the time of Christ. Some, like R. H. Savage, are even willing to deny what the Scriptures teach.

If the doctrine of eternal punishment was clearly and unmistakably taught in every leaf of the Bible, and on every leaf of all the Bibles of all the world, I could not believe a word of it. I should appeal

from these misconceptions of even the seers and the great men to the infinite and eternal Good, who only is God, and who only on such terms could be worshiped.

It is possible to provide almost endless quotations from the early Fathers up to modern theologians who believe in eternal punishment and who do not. Though a study of these opinions is informative, it really proves nothing except that there has been diversity of opinion from the beginning. However, that diversity is clearly linked to the question of whether the Bible exegetically teaches eternal punishment, and, if so, whether the Bible should be believed. Ultimately, the question is, What does the Bible teach?³

HELL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament doctrine of hell unfolds slowly but surely. The principal term used to refer to life after this life is *sheol*, occurring sixty-five times in the Old Testament. Its etymology is uncertain. In the KJV it is translated “grave” thirty-one times, “hell” thirty-one times, and “pit” three times. In the NIV the usual translation is “grave.”

It is clear from the Old Testament that *sheol* in many cases means no more than the grave or the place where a dead body is placed. In Psalm 49:14, for instance, the statement is made, “Like sheep they are destined for the grave, and death will feed on them. The upright will rule over them in the morning; their forms will decay in the grave, far from their princely mansions.” In many other cases, however, it is debatable whether the term “grave” is a proper designation. Even the NIV translates *sheol* otherwise in Deuteronomy 32:22: “For a fire has been kindled by my wrath, one that burns to the realm of death below.” The NIV tries to avoid the idea of two compartments in *sheol*. It is the mind of the interpreter that determines whether *sheol* in a particular passage refers to the grave only or to life after this life in the intermediate state.

The uncertainty as to how *sheol* should be interpreted in the Old Testament led to the extensive debate carried on by William G. T. Shedd with Charles Hodge. Shedd’s *Dogmatic Theology* debated at great length the meaning of *sheol* in his discussion on the intermediate state. Shedd took the position that when *sheol* is used of the saints it refers only to the grave, but when used of the unsaved, in many instances it refers to life after death in a place of judgment and punishment. This is a debatable premise that is difficult to prove. In his discussion he opposed the mythological concept of life after death in which the place of the dead is divided into two compartments, one for the wicked and the other for the righteous. Accordingly, he opposed the teaching of some theologians that prior to the death of Christ *sheol* had two compartments, one for the lost and one for the saved (paradise), but that paradise was not equivalent to heaven. Shedd held that paradise equals heaven in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament.

Charles Hodge, a contemporary of Shedd, did not find the two-compartment theory of *sheol* in the Old Testament incompatible with Scripture. He wrote: “Sheol is represented as the general receptacle or abode of departed spirits, who were there in a state of unconsciousness; some in a state of misery, others in a state of happiness. In all points the pagan idea of *hades* corresponds to the scriptural idea of Sheol.” Hodge found support in Luke 16:19–31, in the parable of Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom and the rich man in *hades*. The fact that the Old Testament view of *sheol* is less specific than the New Testament view of *hades* is not surprising according to Hodge: “It is not, therefore, a matter of surprise that the doctrine of the future state is much less clearly unfolded in the Old Testament than in the New. Still it is there.”

In any case, the Old Testament clearly teaches that there is judgment for the unsaved after this life and that this judgment continues over an extended period of time. The New Testament

confirms this insofar as the unsaved are viewed as still existing at the Great White Throne Judgment—some having been in *hades* for thousands of years—but are cast into the lake of fire at that time (Rev. 20:14).

As described in the Old Testament, *sheol* is a place of darkness. Job, for instance, describes it in these words: “Before I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and deep shadow, to the land of deepest night, of deep shadow and disorder, where even the light is like darkness” (Job 10:21–22). The expression “silence of death” is used in Psalm 94:17 (cf. 115:17). David also questions whether there will be any praise to God from the grave (Ps. 6:5). Those in the grave have no knowledge of what is transpiring on earth. As Job states in Job 14:21, “If his sons are honored, he does not know it; if they are brought low, he does not see it.” Job goes on to say that the one in the grave “feels but the pain of his own body and mourns only for himself” (14:22). The book of Ecclesiastes enlarges on this:

Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have part in anything that happens under the sun (Eccl. 9:4–6).

The dismal picture of *sheol* in many passages of the Old Testament, however, is offset by some passages that apply blessedness for the righteous. The Old Testament clearly teaches that for the righteous, life after this life is one of blessedness, as in the case of Enoch, who went to heaven without dying (Gen. 5:24). Balaam stated in one of his oracles, “Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs!” (Num. 23:10). In a psalm of Asaph, the poet said, “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory” (Ps. 73:24). While there are occasional references to blessedness in the intermediate state, most of the references to hope after this life for the righteous anticipate their future resurrection and blessing in the presence of God. Comparatively little is said about the intermediate state in the Old Testament.

The lot of the wicked, however, is also made clear. *Sheol* was a place of punishment and retribution. In Isaiah the Babylonians killed in divine judgment are pictured as being greeted in *sheol* by those who died earlier. The prophet writes:

The grave below is all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you—all those who were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their thrones—all those who were kings over the nations. They will all respond, they will say to you, “You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us” (Isa. 14:9–10).

The reference in the NIV to the “grave” in verse 9 is *sheol*, though translating it this way does not explain the conscious state of those who are mentioned in the passage.

As previously mentioned, Deuteronomy 32:22 states, “For a fire has been kindled by my wrath, one that burns to the realm of death below.” The “realm of death below” refers to *sheol* and implies that there is punishment by fire once an unsaved person dies. The Old Testament is clear that judgment follows the death of the wicked; see Job 21:30–34, where the idea that the wicked escape punishment and are spared from the day of calamity and God’s eternal wrath is declared to be “falsehood.” Obviously, the wrath of God is more than mere physical death. Psalm 94:1–2 states, “O LORD, the God who avenges, O God who avenges, shine forth. Rise up, O Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve.” In verse 23 of the same psalm the psalmist says of God, “He will repay them for their sins and destroy them for their wickedness; the LORD our God will destroy them.” In Isaiah 33:14–15, Isaiah writes, “The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: ‘Who of us can dwell with a consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting

burning?’ ” Of the wicked whom God will condemn, the same prophet later writes, “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind” (Isa. 66:24).

Though it may be conceded that the Old Testament revelation is only partial and much confirming revelation is found in the New Testament, it clearly suggests that the sufferings of the wicked continue forever. Many opponents of the concept of eternal punishment point out, however, such important words in the Old Testament as *olam* and *nesah*, though commonly translated “ever” (as in the KJV, where it is so translated 267 times), nevertheless, in some contexts is limited as to its duration in time. In Exodus 27:21 in the KJV, for example, the lamp in the tabernacle as burning always is stated to be “a statute for ever.” The NIV, recognizing that the tabernacle does not continue forever, describes it as “a lasting ordinance.” Furthermore, many promises in Scripture that are to be fulfilled as long as the earth lasts obviously are not forever, because the earth itself will be destroyed.

To some, that the idea of “forever” does not always mean an infinite duration in time may seem to be an unnecessary concession to the opponents of eternal punishment. But like the word “all,” this word has to be interpreted in its context; and where the context itself limits the duration, this needs to be recognized in fairness to the text. At the same time, however, an important principle must be observed all throughout the Scriptures: while the term “forever” may sometimes be curtailed in duration by its context, such termination is never once mentioned in either the Old or New Testament as relating to the punishment of the wicked. Accordingly, the term continues to mean “everlasting” or “unending in its duration.” Unfortunately, this is not recognized by those who are opposed to eternal punishment.

Though the total testimony of the Old Testament is somewhat obscure on details, the main facts are clear. There is life after death. The life for the righteous is blessed; the life for the wicked is one of divine judgment and punishment. There is no intimation that this punishment should not be taken literally and continue eternally. Obviously, however, much additional light is cast upon the subject in the New Testament, where *hades* is equivalent to the Old Testament word *sheol*.

THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

In the last four hundred years before Christ there was extensive discussion among Jewish theologians concerning the Old Testament doctrine of everlasting punishment. Generally speaking, the Pharisees taught that there was everlasting punishment, while the school of Hillel thought that the punishment of the ungodly would last only a year before they would be annihilated. The latter believed that some of the more wicked would go on being punished for some time. These interpretations of Jewish scholars in the intertestamental period are not decisive as they lack the further revelation of the New Testament. Their conclusions are not backed by Scripture.

GENERAL TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ON HELL

In the New Testament three different words are used in regard to life after death for the unsaved. The Greek word *hades* is transliterated as “Hades” in the NIV in five instances (Matt. 16:18; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14); twice it is translated as “in the depths” (Matt. 11:23; Luke 10:15), once as “hell” (Luke 16:23), and twice as “the grave” (Acts 2:27, 31). In general, the Greek word *hades* is equivalent to the Old Testament *sheol*. The same problem exists as to whether it refers only to the grave or to life after death in the intermediate state. A question can naturally be raised why the NIV, after avoiding using transliteration in all the Old Testament references of *sheol*,

transliterated *hades* as “Hades” in some New Testament passages and in others used three different words where the context is hardly determinative. Be that as it may, what is clear is that *hades* is used of the temporary place of the unsaved after death but is not used in relationship to the lake of fire or eternal punishment, though it implies duration at least for the time being.

The most definitive term in the New Testament is *gehenna*, uniformly translated “hell” and referring to everlasting punishment (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6). One instance of the Greek word *tartaros* is found in 2 Peter 2:4; it is translated “hell” and considered equivalent to *gehenna*. It is obvious that the New Testament adds considerably to the doctrine of life after death and particularly to the subject of everlasting punishment.

THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

One of the most significant aspects of the doctrine of everlasting punishment is the fact that Jesus himself defined this more specifically and in more instances than any New Testament prophet. All the references to *gehenna*, except James 3:6, are from the lips of Christ himself, and there is an obvious emphasis on the punishment for the wicked after death as being everlasting. The term *gehenna* is derived from the Valley of Hinnom, traditionally considered by the Jews the place of the final punishment of the ungodly. Located just south of Jerusalem, it is referred to in Joshua 15:8 and 18:16, where this valley was considered a boundary between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. In this place human sacrifices were offered to Molech; these altars were destroyed by Josiah (2 Kings 23:10). The valley was later declared to be “the valley of slaughter” by Jeremiah (Jer. 7:30–33). The valley was used as a burial place for criminals and for burning garbage. Whatever its historical and geographic meaning, its usage in the New Testament is clearly a reference to the everlasting state of the wicked, and this seems to be the thought in every instance. In James 3:6 the damage accomplished by an uncontrolled tongue is compared to a fire which “corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”

Christ warned that a person who declares others a fool “will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matt. 5:22). In Matthew 5:29 Christ states that it is better to lose an eye than to be thrown into *gehenna*, with a similar thought regarding it being better to lose a hand than to go into *gehenna* (Matt. 5:30). In Matthew 10:28 believers in Christ are told not to be afraid of those who kill the body, but rather to “fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (KJV). A similar thought is mentioned in Matthew 18:9, where it is declared better “to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.” In Matthew 23:15 Christ denounces the Pharisees who “travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.” In Matthew 23:33 he denounces the Pharisees and the scribes, asking the question, “How will you escape being condemned to hell?” In Mark 9:43, 45, 47, the thought recorded in Matthew about it being better to lose part of the body than to be cast into hell is repeated (cf. Matt. 5:22, 29, 30). Luke 12:5 contains a similar thought to that expressed in Matthew 10:28, that one should fear the devil far more than those who might kill them physically. Though not always expressly stated, the implication is that the punishment will have duration and be endless.

Though the word *gehenna* is not used in Matthew 7:19, 20:13–14, where it is stated: “The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the

lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.” John implies that the grave will some day give up the bodies of the wicked dead and that they will be resurrected in order to enter into the eternal punishment of the lake of fire. The fact that they are still in existence indicates that their existence was not terminated when they died physically, but they are still alive and suffering torment in *hades*, the intermediate state up to this point. This state is then emptied, however, and those who are in it are cast into the lake of fire, the second death; this action indicates eternal separation from God.

The lake of fire does not provide annihilation but continual suffering. In Revelation 20:10, when the devil is cast into the lake of fire at the end of the millennium, the beast, the world ruler, and the false prophet who were thrown into the lake of fire at the beginning of the thousand-year reign of Christ are still there, sharing torment in the lake of fire with the devil “day and night for ever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). In Revelation 21:7–8 the unsaved are pictured as having their place “in the fiery lake of burning sulfur.” Though the word *gehenna* is not used, the lake of fire is, and it serves as a synonym for the eternal place of torment.

If it is conceded that the Bible clearly teaches that there is punishment after this life and that this punishment has duration, the question must now be raised whether the Scriptures clearly state that this is everlasting.

IS THE PUNISHMENT OF THE WICKED EVERLASTING?

The concept of eternity, or everlasting, is found frequently in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament a number of Hebrew words are used to express the thought of eternity, such as *olam*, *alam*, *nesah*, and *ad*. In the New Testament *aionios* is used most prominently.

As Buis points out, the Greek word *aionios* in every instance refers to eternity. He writes: “*Aionios* is used in the New Testament sixty-six times: fifty-one times of the happiness of the righteous, two times of the duration of God in His glory, six other times where there is no doubt as to its meaning being endless, and seven times of the punishment of the wicked.” By contrast, Buis points out that *aion* is used ninety-five times but not necessarily of unlimited duration. He states: “*Aion* is used ninety-five times: fifty times of unlimited duration, thirty-one times of duration that has limits, and nine times to denote the duration of future punishment.” Even *aion*, however, is sometimes used of endless punishment, as in 2 Corinthians 4:18, where the eternal is contrasted to the temporal.

In support of the idea that *aionios* means “endless” is its consistent placement alongside the duration of the life of the godly in eternity. If the state of the blessed is eternal, as expressed by this word, there is no logical reason for giving limited duration to punishment. As W. R. Inge states, “No sound Greek scholar can pretend that *aionios* means anything less than eternal.”

The assertion of Buis and Inge that *aionios* always means eternal is challenged by some on the basis of texts where there may be a question about it. In Romans 16:25, for instance, the word is used in regard to the “mystery hidden for long ages past” (*aionios* is translated “hidden for long ages past”). The KJV translates *aionios* with the phrase “through times eternal.” Here eternity is viewed as extending from eternity in the past to the present rather than eternity beginning in the present and going on endlessly in the future. Accordingly, it may be held that Romans 16:25 regards *aionios* as having an infinite duration even though terminated in time, just as eternal punishment has eternal duration but begins in time.

Aionios also occurs in 2 Timothy 1:9, where it is translated “the beginning of time” (“before times eternal” in the KJV). Here the thought is the same: infinity extending to the past rather than to the future. In Titus 1:2 *aionios* is translated “the beginning of time” (“times eternal” in the KJV). Again the thought is the same: infinity extending to the past rather than to the future. In Philemon 15 *aionios* is translated “for good” in the NIV, but “for ever” in the KJV. Here the thought is that beginning in time Paul will have fellowship with Philemon some believe that this is what Christ meant when he said, “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Also implied in Christ’s statement in Matthew 7:23 is the truth that part of the punishment of hell is to be separated from Christ forever: “Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

In the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:18–23) Christ declares that the weeds will be burned (Matt. 13:29), implying punishment by fire. In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), the worthless servant is thrown “into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30). Likewise, the goats in the revelation of the judgment of Gentiles (Matt. 25:31–46) are declared to be cast “into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (verse 41), again implying everlasting punishment. Other instances are found, such as Matthew 18:6, where it states that it would be better to be drowned than to lead a child astray. In the parable of the wedding feast (Matt. 22:13), the one without a garment is cast “into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 22:13).

Jesus also indicated that punishment in hell would be by degrees, depending on their understanding of the will of their master. Accordingly, one servant would have a lighter beating than another (Luke 12:47, 48), and hypocrites would receive more condemnation than others (Mark 12:40). If one accepts the authority of Scripture as being inerrant and accurate, it is clear that Christ taught the doctrine of everlasting punishment.

According to Paul, the wicked will receive sudden destruction when the Day of the Lord overtakes them (1 Thess. 5:3) and will suffer divine wrath (1 Thess. 5:9). The punishment of the wicked is described as “everlasting destruction,” which is more than physical death, and as being “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thess. 1:9). In Hebrews 6:3 “eternal judgment” is in store for those who are unsaved, and in 10:27 this is enlarged with a reference to “only a fearful expectation of judgment and raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”

Likewise, punishment is predicted for the angels, as stated emphatically in 2 Peter 2:4: “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them into hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment.” Angels will not be judged finally until the end of the millennium and hence will be punished for a long period of time. This is declared to be in keeping with God’s program of judging the world at the time of Noah and condemning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; his declared purpose is “to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment” (2 Peter 2:9). The reference to hell in 2 Peter 2:4 is the one instance in the Bible where *tartaros* is used for everlasting punishment. This word is frequently found in Jewish apocalyptic literature, where it refers to a place even lower than hell where the wicked are punished.

Jude adds a word of special revelation concerning the angels as being “kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day” (Jude 6). This is compared to the judgment on the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, who are “an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7).

Revelation 14:10–11 states that those who receive the mark of the beast, indicating worship of the final world ruler as God, “will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” By contrast, the martyred dead are declared to be blessed of the Lord (Rev. 14:13–14). Though neither *hades* nor *gehenna* is found in Revelation 14, the statement clearly defines hell as eternal punishment.

While *gehenna* is not found in the book of Revelation, *hades* is referred to in four instances (Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13–14). In Revelation 1:18 Christ is said to “hold the keys of death and of Hades.” Christ himself is described as “the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!” (Rev. 1:18). Just as Christ was referring to his own physical death in this passage, it may be assumed that the death of those for whom he holds the key is also physical death. *Hades*, however, in some instances refers to more than the grave and indicates the intermediate state, as Christ himself taught in Luke 16:19–31. In Revelation 6:8 the pale horse, representing death, is described: “Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him.” The reference may be to physical death and the grave, or it may in the context go beyond the grave to the intermediate state of suffering for the wicked.

Two of the most important references occur in Revelation forever, that is, to infinity. If understood in these ways, *aionios* is used in all these texts with an infinite sense, either to the past or to the future. In none of these cases does it simply mean “for a long time.”

The concept of eternity is frequently attributed to God in the Old Testament (Ps. 10:16; 41:13; 45:6, 8; 48:14; 90:2; Isa. 9:6; 26:4; Mic. 4:7; Mal. 1:4, to name just a few of the many references). The New Testament has a similar emphasis on the eternity of God (John 8:35; 12:34; Rom. 1:25; 9:5; 2 Cor. 9:9; Heb. 5:6; 6:20; 7:17; 13:8; 2 Peter 3:18). This doctrine is especially emphasized in the book of Revelation (1:6; 4:9, 10; 5:13, 14; 7:12; 10:6; 11:15; 15:7).

A frequent use of the concept of eternity is that of eternal life attributed to those who are born again (Matt. 25:46; Mark 10:30; John 3:15; 4:36; 5:39; 6:51, 54, 58, 68; 10:28; 12:25; 17:2, 3; Acts 13:48; Rom. 2:7; 5:21; 6:23; etc.). In evangelical Christianity the eternity of God and the eternal life of those who are saved are universally recognized. The question remains as to whether this concept of eternity is carried over into eternal punishment.

In the Old Testament, where eternity is principally expressed by the Hebrew *olam*, it becomes obvious that the same word that is used of God and his eternity is also used of some promises that are fulfilled in time. For example, the promise of the land of Canaan given to Israel in Genesis 13:15, stated to be perpetual or forever, is clearly taught to be unconditional as to fulfillment but limited as far as duration is concerned. Obviously, when a new heaven and new earth are created, the land of Canaan will no longer exist as a separate entity. Likewise, the Law is referred to frequently as a statute forever (Ex. 12:24; 27:21; 28:43; etc.). But again, it was given as a temporary rule of life for Israel which is superseded in the New Testament by the age of grace, with many of the details of the Law no longer applicable. Regarding the use of the Hebrew word *olam* as the concept of eternity, therefore, each passage needs to be studied in the light of its context.

A general rule, however, can be established that unless Scripture specifically terminates a promise given “forever,” limiting it to time in contrast to eternity, we may assume that “eternity” means “everlasting,” as indicated in the character of God and in the character of salvation in Christ. In a similar way, “all” means “all” unless limited by the context. When examined in the light of

this principle, the promises of eternal punishment have no such alleviating factor. The book of Revelation attributes eternity to God and, at the same time, states that the wrath of God continues forever (Rev. 15:7; 19:3).

The ultimate convincing argument for eternal punishment is found in Revelation 20:10–15, in the context of how eternity will change things in time. In this passage, as has been previously pointed out, the beast and the false prophet, cast into the lake of fire at the beginning of the millennium (19:20), are still there a thousand years later and are declared to join with Satan in the torment which will continue “day and night for ever and ever” (20:10). The state of the wicked is likewise declared to be that of being cast into the lake of fire. The wicked who had suffered in *hades*, in some cases for thousands of years, are then transferred to the lake of fire (20:12–15). John goes on to imply they will have a permanent “place ... in the fiery lake of burning sulfur” (21:8). Instead of predicting the termination of punishment, all the implications of these statements support the doctrine of eternal punishment. Finally, though *aionios* is generally used of eternal life, it is specifically coupled with punishment of the wicked in Jude 7, where Jude says of Sodom and Gomorrah: “They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” This is in contrast to “eternal life” mentioned in verse 21.

As I have said earlier, a confirmation of eternal punishment is found in the use of the Greek word *aionios*. A most convincing evidence that eternity usually means “without beginning or end” is found in the definition of this word in Arndt and Gingrich. This word is used normally in the New Testament to mean either “without beginning or end” or at least “without end.” None of the passages uses the word in a sense other than infinity in time, but it may mean infinity in time past or infinity in time future. The similar word, *aion*, while generally meaning “eternity,” sometimes means “an age or a portion of eternity,” much like *olam* in the Old Testament.

The earlier conclusion that eternal punishment is everlasting, regardless of the terminology, is supported by the fact that it is never regarded as being terminated. This holds for the New Testament especially. Doubting the matter of eternal punishment requires either doubting the Word of God or denying its literal, normal interpretation.

CAN ETERNAL PUNISHMENT BE HARMONIZED WITH GRACE?

Some who concede that the Bible teaches eternal punishment nevertheless say that this concept is alleviated by the fact that God is a God of love and a God of grace. As the evidence unfolds on the eternity of punishment of the lost, it becomes clear that the objections to it are not exegetical but theological. This illustrates the centuries-long tension between theology, or a system of interpretation, and biblical exegesis. If exegesis is the final factor, eternal punishment is the only proper conclusion; taken at its face value, the Bible teaches eternal punishment. This observation is supported by the fact that many who reject eternal punishment also reject the inerrancy and accuracy of the Bible and even reject the teachings of Jesus. For instance, Buis quotes Theodore Parker in his *Two Sermons*, “I believe that Jesus Christ taught eternal punishment ... I do not accept it on His authority.” One is faced with the fact that the only place one can prove absolutely that God is a God of love and grace is from Scripture. If one accepts the doctrine of God’s love and grace as revealed in the Bible, how can that person question, then, that the same Bible teaches eternal punishment?

The problem here is the obvious lack of understanding of the infinite nature of sin as contrasted to the infinite righteousness of God. If the slightest sin is infinite in its significance, then it also demands infinite punishment as a divine judgment. Though it is common for all Christians to wish

that there were some way out of the doctrine of eternal punishment because of its inexorable and unyielding revelation of divine judgment, one must rely in Christian faith on the doctrine that God is a God of infinite righteousness as well as infinite love. While on the one hand he bestows infinite grace on those who trust him, he must, on the other hand, inflict eternal punishment on those who spurn his grace.

IS ETERNAL PUNISHMENT TO BE UNDERSTOOD LITERALLY?

Obviously, the description of eternal punishment in the Bible only partially reveals its true nature. Eternal punishment is partly mental, partly physical, and partly emotional. The fact that confinement in hell is pictured also as a place of total darkness is no doubt contributory to mental anguish, though there is no indication of genuine repentance in hell. The emotional problems of facing eternal punishment are beyond human computation and are certainly a major portion of the judgment that is inflicted on the wicked.

IS THE FIRE OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT TO BE UNDERSTOOD LITERALLY?

In the attempt to alleviate some of the suffering of eternal punishment, the question is naturally raised as to whether the fire of eternal punishment is literal. However, the frequent mention of fire in connection with eternal punishment supports the conclusion that this is what the Scriptures mean (cf. Matt. 5:22; 18:8–9; 25:41; Mark 9:43, 48; Luke 16:24; James 3:6; Jude 7; Rev. 20:14–15).

There is sufficient evidence that the fire is literal. In the case of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31, the rich man in *hades* asked father Abraham to cool his tongue with water because, “I am in agony in this fire” (v. 24). Thirst would be a natural reaction to fire, and the desire to cool his tongue would be in keeping with this description.

It is true that Scripture sometimes uses a language of appearance, describing something as nearly as possible in terms that can be understood in our present life. This acknowledgment does not alter the fact, however, that punishment is eternal and that it is painful, both mentally and physically. Scripture never challenges the concept that eternal punishment is by literal fire. Objections have to be on philosophic or theological grounds rather than on exegetical ones.

Though it may be true that the picture of eternal punishment is only a partial revelation of its true character, obviously, the reality of it is no less painful or severe. Eternal punishment is an unrelenting doctrine that faces every human being as the alternative to grace and salvation in Jesus Christ. As such, it is a spur to preaching the gospel, to witnessing for Christ, to praying for the unsaved, and to showing compassion on those who need to be snatched as brands from the burning.²

² Walvoord, J. F. (1996). [The Literal View](#). In S. N. Gundry & W. Crockett (Eds.), *Four Views on Hell* (pp. 9–28). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.



Face Value Position

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

YEASAYERS – FAITHFUL W/O QUESTION TO THE VERBATIM TEXT – STATE W/O DOUBT:

- Their Position Respects Genuineness Of Bible Revelation & Inerrancy Of Scripture.
- Concerning The Fundamentals Of Salvation – The Basics Of The Christian Life & The Doctrine Of The Afterlife – That According To Them - The Bible Is Self-Interpreting!
- The Bible Clearly Teaches That There Is Life After Death For Those Qualified For Blessing & Those Qualified For Judgment.
- The Bible Further Explains That The Terrible Possibility Of Hell Exists Because Human Beings Have The Freedom To Reject God's Love For Them.
- The Common Opinion In The Ancient Church Was, That The Future Punishment Of The Impenitent Wicked Is Everlasting.
- Orthodox Position Past & Present Is That This Punishment Is Punitive Not Redemptive.
- Old Testament Usage Of Sheol Designates Simply As The Grave - The Abode Of Departed Spirits In States Of Unconsciousness, Happiness, Or *Misery!*

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

YEASAYERS – FAITHFUL W/O QUESTION TO THE VERBATIM TEXT – STATE W/O DOUBT:

- While The Hebrew Term For “Forever” May Sometimes Be Curtailed In Duration By Its Scriptural Context – Such Termination Is Never Once Biblically Mentioned As Relating To The Punishment Of The Wicked.
- General Description For The **Cursed**: Job 10: 21 & 22; 14: 22 - & - Isaiah 14: 9 & 10; Isaiah 33: 14 & 15; 66: 24.
- Intertestamental Period: In the 400 years between the testaments there was extensive discussion among Jewish theologians concerning the O.T. Doctrine of Everlasting Punishment. While the Pharisees taught foreverness, the School Of Hillel taught recompense for a one calendar cycle followed by the soul's forgotten Annihilation.
- Jesus Christ – During His Earthly Ministry – Taught Doubly So As To Curtail The Commentary Of Hillel & Reinforce The Pharisaic Viewpoint Regarding Punishment.
- In The New Testament Three Different Words Were Utilized For The Unsavd In Afterlife Experience:
Hades – Gehenna – Tartaros.

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

YEASAYERS – FAITHFUL W/O QUESTION TO THE VERBATIM TEXT – STATE W/O DOUBT:

- The Greek word hades is transliterated as “Hades” in the NIV in five instances (Matthew 16: 18; Revelation 1: 18; 6: 8; 20: 13, 14) & twice it is translated as “in the **depths**” (Matthew 11: 23; Luke 10: 15) & twice as “the grave” (Acts 2: 27, 31) & once as “hell” (Luke 16: 23).
- In general, the Greek word hades is equivalent to the Old Testament sheol. The problem exists as to whether it refers only to the grave or to life after death in the intermediate state – depending on context – but always as the temporary place of duration for the unsavd after death.
- Most Definitive Term Used In The New Testament Is Gehenna, Uniformly Translated “Hell” & Referring To Everlasting Punishment: Matthew 5: 22, 29, 30; 10: 28; 18: 9; 23: 15, 33; Mark 9: 43, 45, 47; Luke 12: 5; James 3: 6.
- One Instance Of The Greek Word Tartaros – Lowest Level Of Hell - Is Found In 2 Peter 2: 4 & Is Translated “Hell” As Well.

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

YEASAYERS – FAITHFUL W/O QUESTION TO THE VERBATIM TEXT – STATE W/O DOUBT:

- All But One Reference To Gehenna Or Hell Are From The Lips Of Our Savior Himself.
- The Term Gehenna Derived From The Valley Of Hinnom – Located south of Jerusalem, it is referred to in Joshua 15: 8 and 18: 6, where this valley is considered a boundary between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.
- In addition – in this place – human sacrifices were offered to Molech; These altars were destroyed by Josiah in II Kings 23: 10. The valley was later declared to be “the valley of **slaughter**” by Jeremiah (Jer. 7: 30ff). The valley was also used as a burial place for criminals and for burning garbage – later the two tasks became one in the same.
- James 3: 6 - Jesus references the damage caused by the untamed tongue – the uncontrolled fire unleashed – that paraphrased “corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself ignited by and leads back to Hell.”
- Matthew 5: 22 – Jesus references our respect and regard for others as ourselves determines our own destiny in a basic sense.

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

YEASAYERS – FAITHFUL W/O QUESTION TO THE VERBATIM TEXT – STATE W/O DOUBT:

- Matthew 5: 30 – Jesus references further in regard to ourselves – sometimes in order to reach our ultimate objective - the prior relationship claim of our spiritual being has to be recognized over the demands of our physical being.
- Matthew 7: 19 – Jesus emphasizes that the faithful will be recognized by their fruits not identified by their leaves.
- Matthew 13: 18 – Jesus compares equally between those plants deemed fruitless and those uprooted as weeds.
- Matthew 23: 15 – Jesus addresses the erroneous motivation, misdirected zeal, and consequences both proximate & ultimate of the legalistic mentality – making damage and destruction meriting Hell.
- Matthew 25: 14 & Matthew 22: 13 – Parable Of The Talents & Of The Wedding Feast – Jesus Reinforces The Traditional Interpretation Of Pain, Punishment, & Eternal Fire!
- Matthew 25: 31 – This Abode Will Be Shared Forever With The Devil & His Angels!

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

YEASAYERS – FAITHFUL W/O QUESTION TO THE VERBATIM TEXT – STATE W/O DOUBT:

- Revelation 20: 13 – In The Judgment Scene – The **Lake Of Fire** Is Referred To As The Second Death – This Action Indicates Eternal Separation From God!
- The Punishment Of The Wicked Is Everlasting. In the Old Testament a number of Hebrew words are used to express the thought of eternity – *olam, alam, nesah, ad*, etc. In the New Testament – the Greek word *aiionios* is most prominent in usage. The term *aiionios* always refers to eternity.
- *Aionios* Is N. T. Applied 66 Times: 51 times as regards the happiness of the righteous; 6 times to variously designate as “endless”; 2 times of the duration of God in His glory; 7 times for the punishment of the wicked.
- In Support Of The Idea That *Aionios* Means “Endless” Is Its Consistent Placement Alongside The Duration Of The Rewarded Life In Eternity.
- *Aionios* Usually Means “Without Beginning Or End” – Contextually It Is Often Translated “Without End” Because It May Mean Infinity In Time Past Or In Future.

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

YEASAYERS – FAITHFUL W/O QUESTION TO THE VERBATIM TEXT – STATE W/O DOUBT:

- As A General Rule – Like “All Means All” Unless Limited By Context – Thus Unless Scripture Specifically Terminates A Promise Given “Forever” – Limiting It In Time In Contrast To Eternity – We May Assume That “Eternity” Means “Everlasting”!
- Revelation 15: 7 – States That The **Wrath Of God** Continues Forever!
- Objections To The Literalist Interpretation – Are Said To Be Theology Based Not Exegesis Grounded!
- The Bible Teaches That The Slightest Sin Is Of Infinite Significance Due To The Infinite Righteousness Of God.
- God's Character Is Complemented With Infinite Love; While On One Hand He Bestows Infinite Grace On Those Who Will Trust Him, He Must, On The Other Hand, Inflict Eternal Punishment On Those Who Spurn His Grace!

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

YEASAYERS – FAITHFUL W/O QUESTION TO THE VERBATIM TEXT – STATE W/O DOUBT:

- **Eternal Punishment Is An Unrelenting Doctrine – The Truth Of Which Is Meant As The Main Motivation To Gospel Preaching!**
- **Objections To The Literalist Interpretation – Are Said To Be Driven By Secular Sentimentalism!**
- **Literalists Adherents Evenly Divided Whether Luke 12: 47 & Mark 12: 40 Are Provision For Degrees Of Punishment Corresponding To Degrees Of Reward In The Afterlife.**
- **Literalists Seem Only To Accept Hellfire In Metaphoric Application If Reasoned As An Spiritualized Equivalent In Terms Of Punishment & Sensation Of *Suffering!***



(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartligh.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment

Christian Opposition Agrees As To The Reality Of Hell But Disagrees As To Its Nature:

- Hell: Place Of Cumulative Punishment – Part Mind – Part Emotion – Part Senses; It Is Not A Material Place Of **Heat - Fire - Smoke** & Physical Pain – Bodily Harm Or Torment.
- Although Apologetically Indefensible In Terms Of Scripture – There Exists Nevertheless- Core Instinct – Combined With Hope - Among Many Mature Christians That The God & Father Of Our Lord Jesus Christ Is Not The Type To Torture Endlessly Those Who Decline His Offer Of Salvation.
- Bible Prophecy: Seen Both Fulfilled Literally & Expressed Metaphorically!
- Typically Afterlife Literalist Are Not Comprehensive Biblical Literalist & They Rightly Divide Scripture Discerning Speech Figures, Poetic Passages, & Apocalyptic Visions.

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartligh.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment

Christian Opposition Agrees As To The Reality Of Hell But Disagrees As To Its Nature:

- Critics Of The Literalist Afterlife Position Simply Suggest Extending This Allowance Of Possible Alternative Meaning To Those Several Eschatological Assertions That Theologically Provide Problems.
- These Critics Believe Instead That These Assertions Should Be Understood Not As Literal But Rather As Analogical Descriptions Of The Future.
- Additionally, Uniformly These Critics Strongly Resist Any & All Afterlife Concepts Suggesting That Human Offenses Done In Time & Space Deserve Eternal **Retribution**.
- Exegetical Datum – “Eternity” - Equivalence To “Everlasting Duration” – Not Always Both Positive & Pure.
- Style & Symbol: People & Places Sometimes Are Described In Scripture Utilizing The Literary Language Of Appearance.

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

Christian Opposition Agrees As To The Reality Of Hell But Disagrees As To Its Nature:

- Original Intent Of Biblical Writers Not Literal Referencing Hell Because Of The Usage Of Opposite Imagery In The Same Passages – Matthew, Jude, Revelation - i.e. **"Darkness" & "Fire"**
- Although, Ionic Energized Plasma Burns Molecularly - Physical Fire Works On Physical Bodies With Physical Nerve Endings – Not For Spiritual Beings. The Eternal Fire Was Created For Spirit Beings Like The Devil & His Angels
- The New Testament Descriptions Of Both Heaven & Hell Are Representative Imagery Not Itemized Accounts Of Things & Events.
- The First Century Bible Writers Resourced Those Symbols Of The Age Most Powerful To Communicate Their Meaning.
- Ancient Teachers Utilized Words Symbolically To Underscore Their Points – Rabbinic Hyperbole – Matthew 5: 29 (Self-Mutilation) & Luke 14: 26 (Hate)

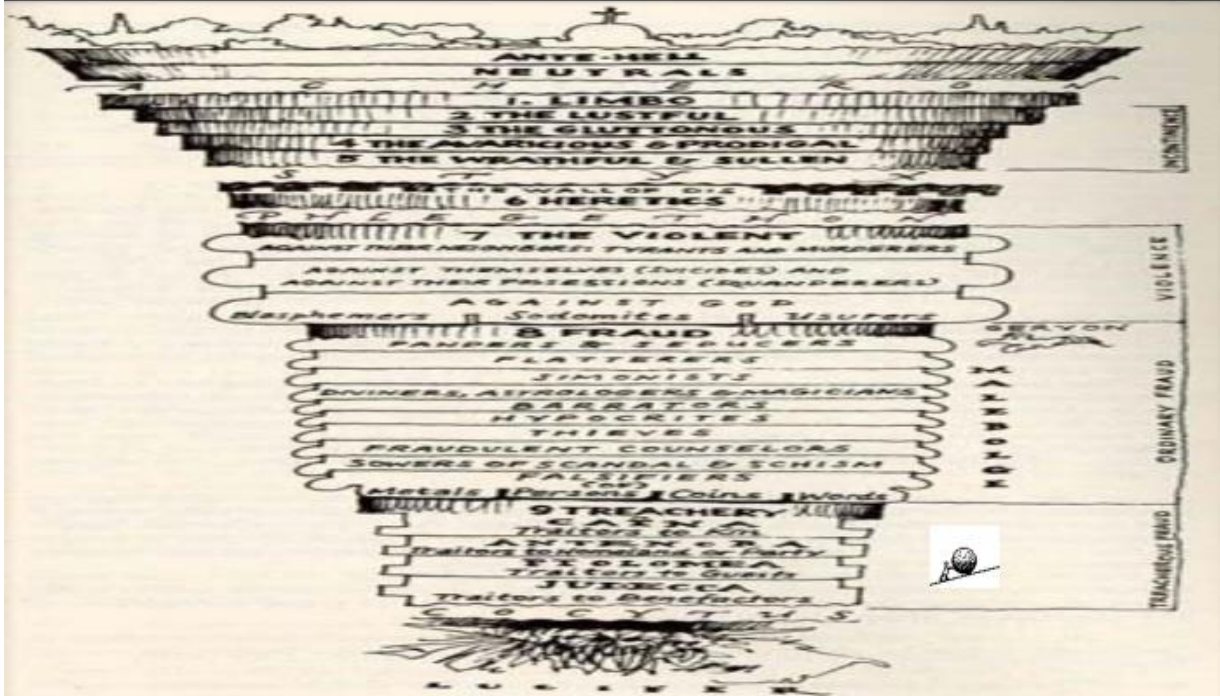
(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Literalist Perspective

- **This View Affirms - Old Testament & New - The Bible Teaches - Hell's Eternal Place – Hell's Fire & Worms – Pain & Punishment**

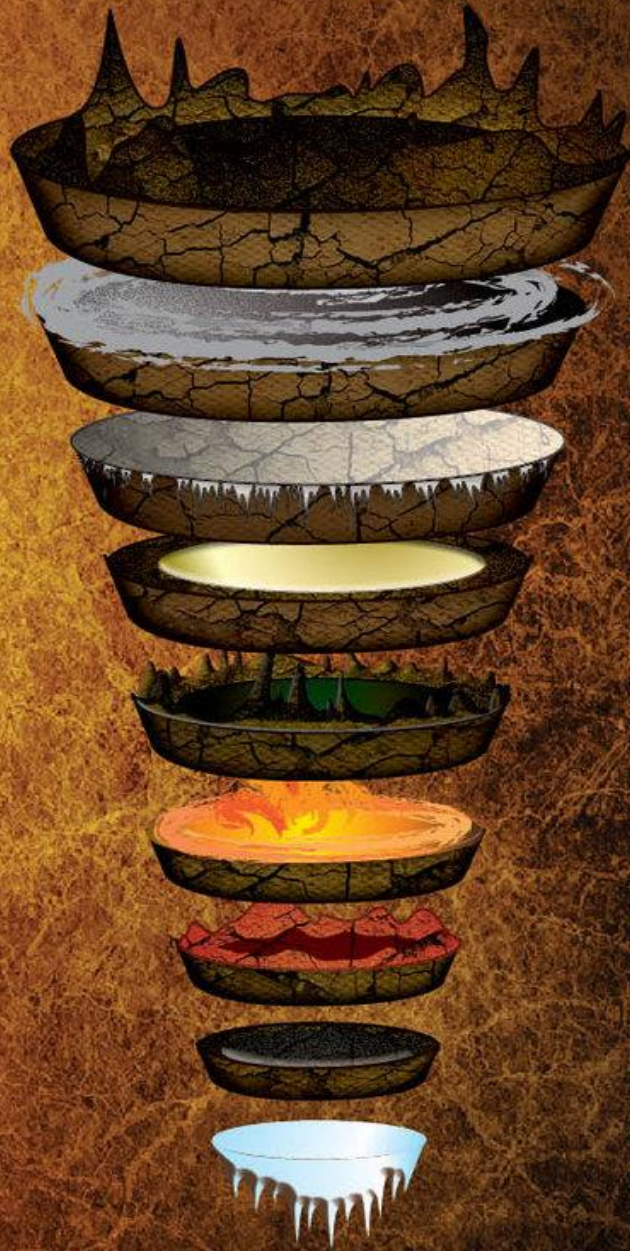
- Critics Of The Literalist Afterlife Position Simply Suggest Extending This Allowance Of Possible Alternative Meaning To Those Eschatological Assertions
- Incompatible Images - Vivid & Concrete – In Horrible Combination - Are Used To Paint The Most Awful Picture Possible.
- For Their Audience - Bible Writers Were Attempting To Describe - The Final Abode Of The Wicked – Both As A Place Of Profound Sorrow & As A Place Of Total Ruin That Words Could Never Describe.
- The Traditions' Emphasis On & Normative Significance Given To - Punitive Language Rather Than Negative Outcome - Is Less Of Exegesis & More Of *Medieval Soteriology*.
- **Elaborate Otherworldly Scenarios Developed By Biblical Theologians & Literary Writers Of The Middle Ages – Especially The Inferno Of Dante - Have Made Profound Impression On The Christian Imagination Although Most Are Completely Unaware Of This Influence.**

THE THINKER LOOKING INTO THE INFERNO



Dante's Inferno

The Nine Circles of Hell



Circle I: Limbo

The souls of Pagans and the unbaptized wander the caves of Limbo in loneliness with the desperation to meet God.

Circle II: Lust

The souls lust are endlessly blown and spiraling in the winds of a violent storm.

Circle III: Gluttony

Because of their cold nature, the souls of gluttony suffers the coldness of a ceaseless icy rain.

Circle IV: Greed

The souls of greed are consumed in a pit of smelting gold, as they claw their way to escape, only to be swept back into the pit.

Circle V: Anger

An endless battle of wailing souls takes place on a murky swamp.

Circle VI: Heresy

Souls are entrapped in a flaming pit, guarded by demons for those who attempt to escape.

Circle VII: Violence

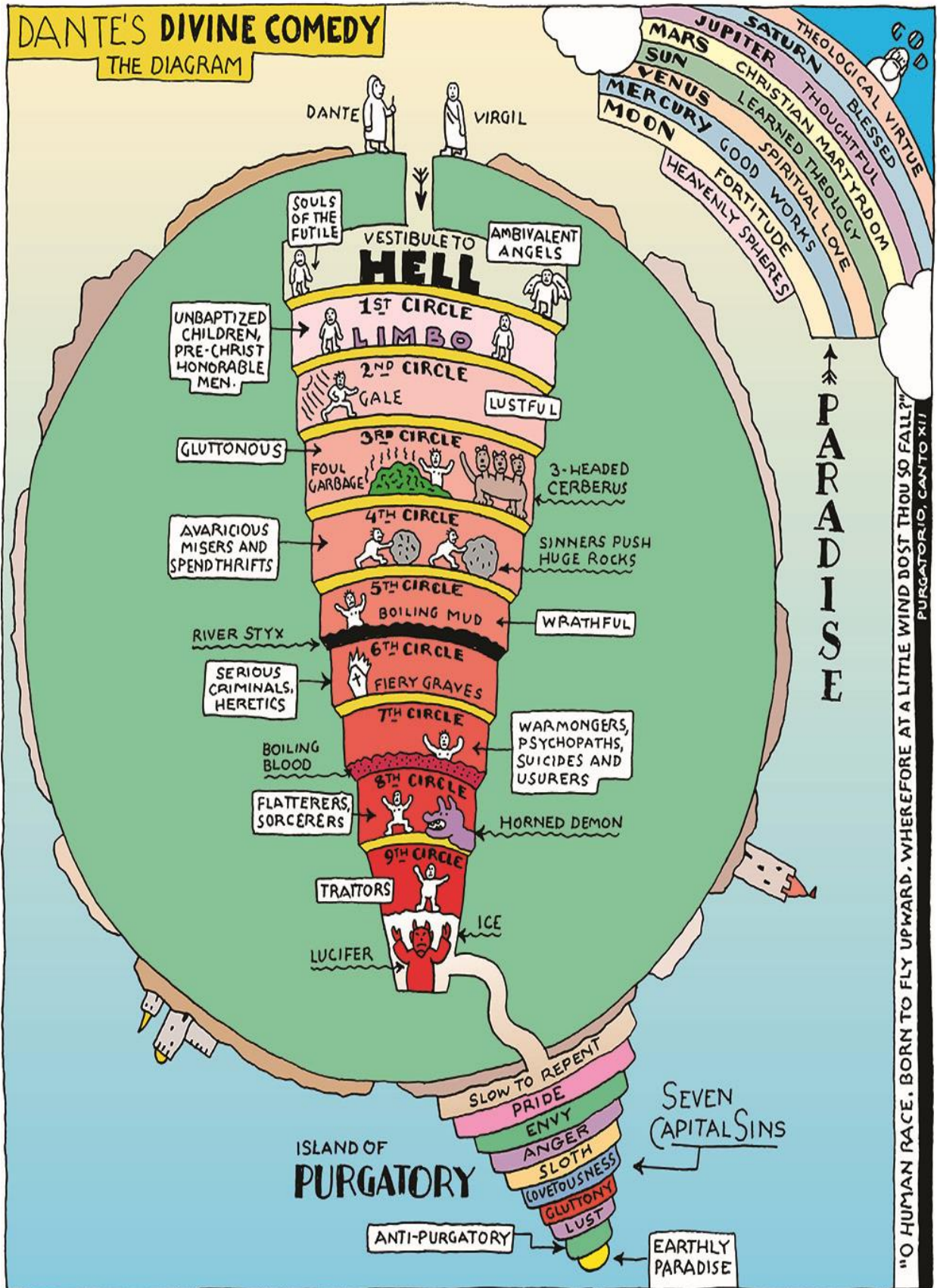
Those who possessed a thirst for violence are condemned to drown in a lake of boiling blood.

Circle VIII: Fraud

Souls are thrown into a pit of darkness, endlessly beaten and tortured by demons.

Circle IX: Treachery

Satan is imprisoned in ice from the waist down in the very center of Circle IX, displayed as a trophy of treachery.



Florentines in hell

Dante meets about 30 identifiable Florentines on his guided tour of hell. The group includes suicides, sodomites, heretics, and a host of other wrongdoers, but Florence is particularly well-represented among thieves and usurers. There are also lines in the poem in which Dante or one of the condemned souls castigates the city as a whole for its greed, deceptive business practices, or other misdeeds.

Early in the poem, Dante converses with a Florentine glutton nicknamed Ciacco, meaning “pig.” Ciacco describes Florence as a place “where envy teems / And swells so that already it brims the sack” (*Inferno*, VI.49–50). He also cites “Three sparks from Hell—Avarice, Envy, Pride” (VI.74) as the cause for the continuing strife in the city. All three relate to property.

Dante finds no familiar faces among the hoarders and spendthrifts—though he expects to—because these sinners have no faces. His guide, Virgil, explains, “Living, their minds distinguished nothing; dead, / They cannot be distinguished.”

The poet meets a whole pack of hometown “heroes” among the usurers. Their faces are scarred by raining embers, but Dante recognizes them by the family crests on the purses they wear around their necks. The Gianfigliuzzi, identified by an azure lion on gold, were notorious for usury. The Ubbriachi, associated with a white goose on red, and Giovanni Buiamonte, tagged with three goats, had similar reputations.

Usury was a touchy subject in Dante’s day because, after all, interest on loans helped build the Florentine economy. Dante had personal connections to the practice, too—his name first appears in public record books as the owner of a debt.

On paper, the Roman Catholic church opposed charging any interest on loans, but its practices hardly reflected such a conviction. Several Florentine bankers grew rich by managing the pontiff’s assets and underwriting his military endeavors.

Collecting papal taxes was particularly lucrative. Firms would send loan sharks out ahead of the tax collectors to lend money, always at exorbitant interest, to peasants who could not pay their taxes. Then the tax collectors would sweep through, take the loaned money, and leave the empty-handed peasants to pay the interest.

Even though he surely knew about practices like this, Dante refrains from condemning moneylending in general. Most likely he considered banking a legitimate venture but felt that bankers who gouged their customers deserved punishment.

Dante discovers five townsmen among the thieves, most from prominent families. He has a hard time identifying them, though, because their bodies constantly collide, morph, and redivide in altered forms. Translator Dorothy Sayers explains in her notes that on earth these men had no regard for “mine” and “thine,” so in hell they cannot even keep their bodies to themselves.

The sight of these five swindlers prompts Dante’s harshest reproach of his hometown:

Florence, rejoice, because thy soaring fame
Beats its broad wings across both land and sea,
And all the deep of Hell rings with thy name!

Five of thy noble townsmen did I see
Among the thieves; which makes me blush anew,
And mighty little honor it does to thee.

(XXVI.1–6)

The thieves, along with all other residents of the eighth circle of Hell, inhabit a region called the “Malebolges” or “Malebowges,” which means “sacks of evil.” The sack image both describes the physical landscape, concentric pocket-like trenches, and reinforces the connection between the hellish City of Dis and earthly cities, like Florence, that are obsessed with wealth.

The last major concentration of Florentines is found in canto XXX among the falsifiers—a subset, like the thieves, of the fraudulent. As the worst of the fraudulent, the falsifiers occupy a ring just above the traitors in nether hell. And while falsification is not necessarily money-related, all of the Florentines here did falsify for gain.

The story of Gianni Schicchi illustrates the depths to which some Florentines would sink for profit. Schicchi had been hired by Simone Donati to impersonate Simone’s deceased father, Buoso, and dictate a will. Buoso’s estate included a lot of stolen property, and Simone was afraid that the old man had succumbed to pangs of conscience and willed the booty back to its legitimate owners.

As requested, Schicchi dictated a sham will that bequeathed the loot to Simone. He also secured himself a tidy sum and swiped the best mare from the dead man’s stables.

Deaf ears

By exposing his city’s corruption in the Comedy, Dante hoped, vainly, to steer Florence onto a higher path. He grieved for the city’s doom:

“A glut of self-made men and quick-got gain
Have bred excess in thee and pride, forsooth,
O Florence! till e’en now thou criest for pain.”
(XVI.73–75)

Dante was not alone in his concern. Many fourteenth-century humanists, including Petrarch and Salutati, argued that wealth did not lead to virtue. One Tuscan writer, Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) devoted an entire dialogue, *On Avarice*, to the problem.

Near the end of Bracciolini’s dialogue, theologian Andrea of Constantinople reflects:

“[I]t is strange that despite the counsel of many fine men, despite so many authoritative opinions and sober judgments placed before our eyes, which ought to affect the minds of mortals, still there are those who, impervious to every argument, continue to dedicate themselves to avarice and worship it as a god. Let them repent while there is still time and attend to their future life.”

Dante is not among the “fine men” Bracciolini names as critics of materialism, but Dante surely would have appreciated the younger author’s point. He also would have been disappointed that, a generation after his *Comedy*, Florentines still needed such a stern warning about greed. One can only imagine how discouraged he would be to see how his advice remains unheeded 700 years later.

Elesha Coffman is associate editor of *Christian History*.³

³ Coffman, E. (2001). [The Root of All Kinds of Evil](#). *Christian History Magazine-Issue 70: Dante’s Guide to Heaven and Hell*.

THE METAPHORICAL VIEW

William V. Crockett

It has been a long time, maybe twenty years, since I have heard a sermon on hell. Perhaps this reflects the churches I attend, but I suspect it has more to do with a general embarrassment Christians feel when confronted with the doctrine of eternal punishment. Even among those who affirm a literal view of hell, silence is the watchword. I suppose people feel it is better to be silent than to offend. Better to teach God's truth in positive, affirming ways than to sound vengeful and uncaring.

Positive teaching, of course, is good advice. In Jesus we find someone who genuinely cares for others, who is touched by the sorrows of the people he meets. He never turns his back on the sick and lowly and always counsels kindness in the face of adversity. Yet his words also reveal a grim fate for the wicked. A large sector of people, he says, will be plunged into hell's unquenchable fires (Matt. 7:13–14; 13:42). Could such teaching be true, *literally* true? Will a portion of creation find ease in heaven, while the rest bum in fire?

Faced with such teaching, it is not hard to see why Christians shrink from discussing the doctrine of hell. Hell is like a dirty little secret that rears its nasty head at inappropriate moments. How often has someone asked—at work, during social occasions—whether we really believe in hell? Jesus believed in hell, we reply, but somehow the picture of desperate faces shrieking in a lake of fire unsettles us. Trapped, we shift awkwardly on our feet and try to soften the impact of what the Bible so clearly seems to say.

Christians should never be faced with this kind of embarrassment—the Bible does not support a literal view of a burning abyss. Hellfire and brimstone are not literal depictions of hell's furnishings, but figurative expressions warning the wicked of impending doom.

My view is similar to that of John Calvin, who determined over four hundred years ago that the “eternal fire” in texts like Matthew 3:12 is better understood metaphorically: “We may conclude from many passages of Scripture, that it [eternal fire] is a metaphorical expression.” Shortly before Calvin, Martin Luther rejected the artists' portrayals of hell, considering them of “no value.”² Luther could talk of a burning hell where the wicked would wish for “a little drop of water,” but in the end he had no desire to press a literal interpretation: “It is not very important whether or not one pictures hell as it is commonly portrayed and described.”⁴ Following the Reformers, Princeton scholar Charles Hodge stated flatly: “There seems no more reason for supposing that the fire spoken of in Scripture is to be a literal fire, than that the worm that never dies is literally a worm.”

Today, from my own informal survey, I would guess that most evangelicals interpret hell's fires metaphorically, or at least allow for the possibility that hell might be something other than literal fire. “Do not try to imagine what it is like to be in hell,” cautions theologian J. I. Packer, “... the mistake is to take such pictures as physical descriptions, when in fact they are imagery symbolizing realities ... far worse than the symbols themselves.” Kenneth Kantzer, a former editor of *Christianity Today*, sums up the view of many evangelicals: “The Bible makes it clear that hell is real and it's bad. But when Jesus spoke of flames ... these are most likely figurative warnings.” Likewise, evangelist Billy Graham holds a metaphorical view. He comments on the image of fire: “I have often wondered if hell is a terrible burning within our hearts for God, to fellowship with God, a fire that we can never quench.”⁹

Opinions on the nature of final judgment will always be with us, and it would be presumptuous to say that I know precisely what hell is going to be like. I do not, of course, and no one else does either. When it comes to the afterlife, only the dead know for sure. Yet we do have revelation from the Lord of the living and the dead, and that revelation—the Scriptures—must be our guide. If it is not, we will find ourselves at sea, driven largely by the winds of the moment.

Even so, there is the problem of interpretation. Should we take the images of heaven and hell literally, or should we see them as metaphors pointing toward real but indefinable states? To affirm the latter is to affirm the reality of heaven and hell, but a heaven and hell that is best left unspecified. The words of Jesus and the apostles tell us that the final abode of the wicked will be a place of awful reckoning, but specifically what that reckoning will be, we cannot know for certain until we pass beyond this life. But we can, I believe, rule out some interpretations and construct a strong argument for the metaphorical view.

GRAPHIC VIEWS OF HELL

Throughout the ages, images of hell have fascinated the church. With few exceptions the literal view of hell dominated Christian thinking from the time of Augustine (fifth century) until the Reformers (sixteenth century). Faced with imaginations that had run riot, theologians such as Luther and Calvin declined to speculate on the literal possibilities of torment. But others, caught in the vortex of history, eagerly supplied portraits detailed enough to satisfy the most morbid of God's creatures.

The Early Days. From the second to the fourth centuries, we find no uniform view on the fate of the lost, but from some Christians emerged descriptions of hell that were gruesome beyond belief. Not satisfied with the images of fire and smoke, some of the more creative pictured hell as a bizarre horror chamber. No excess or novelty escaped them. These vivid Christian portraits are similar to, and often dependent on, earlier Jewish accounts of hell. In both literatures, punishment is based on a measure-for-measure principle, as in the formula, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20). For Christians, Jesus' words about final judgment were significant: "For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Matt. 7:2, NRSV).

In short, whatever member of the body sinned, that member would be punished more than any other in hell (at least they attempted proximate punishment). In Christian literature we find blasphemers hanging by their tongues. Adulterous women who plaited their hair to entice men dangle over boiling mire by their necks or hair. Slanderers chew their tongues, hot irons bum their eyes. Other evildoers suffer in equally picturesque ways. Murderers are cast into pits filled with venomous reptiles, and worms fill their bodies. Women who had abortions sit neck deep in the excretions of the damned. Those who chatted idly during church stand in a pool of burning sulphur and pitch. Idolaters are driven up cliffs by demons where they plunge to the rocks below, only to be driven up again. Those who turned their backs on God are turned and baked slowly in the fires of hell.

The Fourteenth Century. Italian poet Dante Alighieri fueled these early speculations with the publication of his *Divine Comedy*, a popular work that achieved a certain notoriety in western culture. He imagined a place of absolute terror where the damned writhe and scream, while the blessed bask in the glory of Eternal Light. The descriptions of hell come complete with loud wails of sinners boiling in blood, terrified and naked people running from hordes of biting snakes, and lands of heavy darkness and dense fog. In Dante's hell, people must endure thick, burning smoke

that chars their nostrils, and some remain forever trapped in lead cloaks, a claustrophobic nightmare.¹³

Aside from the more gruesome details of hell's pain (details, I might add, that no sane Christian affirms today), there is another odd feature worth mentioning. A number of early theologians taught that saints in heaven could see the torments of the damned. The sight of their suffering increased the pleasure of those saints because they could see divine justice in operation, making their own bliss all the sweeter by contrast. Some people found support for this teaching in the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) and in the pronouncement that those who bear the mark of the beast will be “tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb” (Rev. 14:10; cf. Isa. 66:22–24). To say that the blessed will delight in the torture of the damned is hard to imagine, especially if the damned include loved ones. But because God is just, and because all his acts reasonably should bring joy to the righteous, some Christians are still driven to the conclusion that the faithful will indeed rejoice in the misery of unbelievers. One professor (in a mainline denominational seminary, as surprising as that might sound) found the logic so compelling he often said to his students, “Once we see the glory of Christ, and the hideous nature of sin as God sees it, hell will be understandable. If my own mother were being carried to the mouth of hell, I would stand and applaud.”

The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. Even after the cautions of Luther and Calvin, a number of prominent preachers and theologians still expected hell to be a sea of fire where the wicked would forever bum. They interpreted the New Testament's images of hell literally and saw no need to explain them otherwise. The result was a vivid picture of hell that often went beyond the circle of the New Testament. They avoided the grisly pictures of earlier times, but not the temptation to fill in perdition's details.

In sermons about future punishment, the eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards pictured hell as a raging furnace of fire. He imagined the wicked being cast into liquid fire that is both material and spiritual, that wholly fills body and soul.

The body will be full of torment as full as it can hold, and every part of it shall be full of torment. They shall be in extreme pain, every joint of 'em, every nerve shall be full of inexpressible torment. They shall be tormented even to their fingers' ends. The whole body shall be full of the wrath of God. Their hearts and their bowels and their heads, their eyes and their tongues, their hands and their feet will be filled with the fierceness of God's wrath. This is taught us in many Scriptures....

The famous nineteenth-century British preacher Charles Spurgeon narrated the fate of the wicked this way:

... in fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all thy veins roads for the feet of Pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the Devil shall forever play his diabolical tune of hell's unutterable lament.

Some theologians tried to visualize what it would be like trapped in a hell of liquid fire. “The fire shall pierce them, penetrate them,” said theologian E. B. Pusey, “... like a molten ‘lake of fire,’ rolling, tossing, immersing, but not destroying.”

The Twentieth Century. Literalists today are usually more circumspect. They are loath to provide concrete accounts of hell or to detail its presumed sufferings. But lest we think that graphic pictures of hell are limited to the distant past, I remind you that there are still people who insist on taking the Bible's images in the most literal way. Naturally, we no longer see grotesque pictures of worms or reptiles gnawing on the rotting flesh of condemned humanity. But the furnace of fire and smoke is commonly represented. On my desk I have a copy of a large, superbly done book

entitled, *Why Am I On This Earth?* It is filled with attractive pictures and moving stories that powerfully bring home the gospel. Yet when it comes to the afterlife, the editors feel compelled to depict hell as literally as they can. Men and women clad in tattered clothes¹⁹ stagger along the shore of a fiery lake. They rip at their hair. They clutch their throats. They crawl up the sides of burning rocks trying to find relief in a land where there is no relief. And overshadowing them in the darkened skies, the death skull watches, an eternal reminder of the wrath of God.

Descriptions of this sort no doubt arise from a genuine desire to jolt the complacent into repentance, and this, at least, is commendable. There is nothing wrong with using images to teach truth. After all, Jesus used the images of fire and darkness to warn the wicked of the consequences of sin. Difficulties arise only when we insist that the images reflect concrete reality.

In this chapter I want to underscore that the Scriptures do teach about a real hell, a place of frightful judgment. But precisely what it will be like, we do not know. The problem comes when we see the images in the New Testament—images that in themselves we can easily misunderstand—and then we add on a layer of our own imaginings. But how do we know that hell will conform to our imaginings? Perhaps hell will be nothing like them. By insisting on a literal interpretation, we may distort entirely what the Holy Spirit intends to say through the Scriptures. We ask ourselves how fire works on earth and then project that information on a setting where spirits exist and bodies are not consumed. We imagine a fiery lake tossing the wicked to and fro and saturating them with billows of fire washing over them, and, like Edwards and Pusey, we put into words what our minds see.

But is this what hell will be like? A place where the damned twist and shriek, their eyes bulging with fire, forever consumed by the wrath of God? If this were true, says theologian Nels Ferré, it would make Hitler “a third degree saint, and the concentration camps ... picnic grounds.”

If we really think about it, a literal view of hell is not much different from the graphic views of Dante or the apocryphal writings of early Christians. Of course, no one today believes in a hell of snakes and boiling blood, but how is it different to say that sinners will roast in eternal fire? As Celsus, the second-century critic of Christianity, put it, God becomes the cosmic cook.

THE SYMBOLIC USE OF WORDS

Naturally, we do not want non-Christians to reject the gospel because of a misunderstanding on hell. If the fate of the wicked is not a lake of fire but something else, then we need to make this clear. At the same time, we should not adopt a “softer” view because it sounds better or because it soothes our sensibilities. This simply undermines the authority of Scripture. Unfortunately, some people confuse a high view of Scripture with taking every word of the Bible literally. They think that whatever the Bible says must be true literally.

But this neglects the symbolic use of words, or what is often called rabbinic hyperbole. Rabbis in ancient times (and this includes Jesus) often used colorful speech to bring home forcefully their points. For example, when Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children ... he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26), he does not mean we must hate our parents to be proper disciples. That is a language vehicle used to convey the point that loyalty to him is supreme. We must love Jesus so much that our other loves seem like hate in comparison. The same is true with Matthew 5:29, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” We know Jesus did not intend people to take his words literally, because the context has to do with lust. Removing an eye—or even two eyes—will not help because even blind

people lust. This is colorful speech by Jesus the rabbi; he means that sin is so serious that it is better to lose an eye than to perish in hell.

We must, of course, be careful not to read rabbinic hyperbole in places where Jesus intended his words to be taken literally. When the rich man asks what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus replies, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). Jesus did not mean, “Sell ten percent of what you have,” says Bruce Metzger. “The context makes it absolutely clear that the questioner as well as the disciples, all of whom were Near Easterners, understood Jesus’ words in their literal sense.” That is the meaning of Peter’s words in verse 28, “We have left all we had to follow you!” In the context we understand that Jesus was serious about selling everything, especially since it was common in rabbinic times for people to give up all they had to follow after a master. By paying attention to the contexts, we can avoid overliteralizing on the one hand, or diluting the meaning of Scripture on the other.

Detecting hyperbole is not difficult in statements such as: “Take the plank out of your own eye” (Matt. 7:5); “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24); “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom” (Mark 6:23); “If anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ ... it will be done for him” (Mark 11:23); “Let the dead bury their own dead” (Luke 9:60). Even those holding a literal view of hell would not read these texts literally. The words seem to say one thing, but from the contexts we readily perceive them to be rabbinic hyperbole or colorful speech.

The same is true with the images of hell we find in the New Testament. Their purpose is not to give the reader a literal picture of torment, but a symbolic one. In Jewish and Greek literature we often find vivid pictures of hell, but generally they did not intend their fiery descriptions to be taken literally. When Gentile converts to Christianity encountered hellfire descriptions similar to those they had grown up with, they would naturally interpret those portraits as symbols representing the wrath of God. If they were mistaken and hell was indeed a place of literal heat and smoke, one would expect to find a correction of this view somewhere in the literature of the Bible. But, of course, there is none.

In Jewish literature, vivid pictures of hell are given to show that God has ordained an end to wickedness. The writers do not intend their descriptions to be literal depictions of the fate of the damned, but rather warnings of coming judgment. In the Qumran texts, for example, mutually exclusive concepts like fire and darkness are used more to evoke a horrifying image than to describe a literal hell. The writers speak about “the shadowy place of everlasting fire” (1QS 2:8) and describe hell as “the fire of the dark regions” (1QS 4:13). The same is true with 1 Enoch, which talks about “darkness ... and burning flame” (103:7) and “blazing flames worse than fire” (100:9). Similarly, 2 Enoch 10:2 pictures hell as “black fire.” The Testament of Abraham 12–13 uses fire to picture the Last Judgment. There the archangel Purouel (whose name means fire) “tests the works of men through fire” (13:11). The fire that burns up the works of individuals in both the Testament of Abraham 13:12 and 1 Corinthians 3:15 is not a literal fire, but a symbol of something far greater.

Fire is often nonliteral in Jewish writings; they use colorful language to make a point. Even the Torah was said to have been written with “black fire on white fire” (Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 6:1, 49d), and the tree of life was described as gold-looking in “the form of fire” (2 Enoch 8:4). There are mountains of fire (Pseudo-Philo 11:5), rivers of fire (1 Enoch 17:5), thrones of fire (Apoc. Abram. 18:3), lashes of fire (T. Abram. 12:1)—even angels and demons of fire (2 Bar. 21:6; T. of Sol. 1:10). In the Scriptures God is said to be a “consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24),

who has a throne “flaming with fire” that has a “river of fire” issuing from beneath the throne (Dan. 7:9–10). Sometimes the images of fire approximate our understanding of material fire on earth. God speaks out of fire that does not consume a desert bush (Ex. 3:1–6) and carries a prophet to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). In the New Testament, John says of the exalted Christ, “his eyes were like blazing fire” (Rev. 1:14). Fire is also used figuratively for discord (Luke 12:49), judgment (1 Cor. 3:15), sexual desire (1 Cor. 7:9), and unruly words (James 3:5–6).

As we can see, fire in Jewish and early Christian writings is regularly used to create a mood of seriousness or reverence, often having little to do with the material world of intense heat. When the writers use fire to describe judgment or hell, they use a convenient image that will demonstrate the burning wrath of God. If we try to squeeze images that were meant to be symbolic into literal molds, we ill-serve the cause of Christ. Far from helping, our fanciful theories about roaring flames awaiting unbelievers at the end of the road simply hinder the gospel. Why? Because we either say nothing about the coming judgment or offend the very people we are trying to reach.

In the first century the image of hellfire was common and understandable. Most people saw the fiery abyss as a symbol of something awful and indescribable. Some might have thought the fires were literal, but neither this view nor the use of fiery images created problems in antiquity. Now it is the reverse. Many in Christendom are repulsed by the message that God will consign part of his creation to a lake of fire—and they are not loath to tell us so. And what happens? We hold our tongues in embarrassment, never mentioning that God will banish the wicked from his presence. Even Hollywood, with its movies like *Ghost*, has a stronger message of coming judgment than most preachers in the pulpits of America.

The point is we must get back to preaching the whole counsel of God, and this includes warning the wicked of impending judgment. What good does it do to stand within the four walls of our churches, affirming a belief in literal flames, when outside the silence of our lips belies our very words? It is true that hell is *pictured* as a flaming pit, but this we shall see, is just that—a picture used to demonstrate the utter seriousness of divine judgment. It is simply unwarranted to describe hell in the detail given above.

And herein lies the problem of the literal view: In its desire to be faithful to the Bible, it makes the Bible say too much. The truth is we do not know what kind of punishment will be meted out to the wicked. Our responsibility is to preach and teach what we know, not to go beyond the information revealed in Scripture. God has declined to tell us everything about existence beyond the grave, but he expects us to proclaim what he has revealed. The doctrine of eternal punishment will never embarrass us when we preach what we know: Judgment is coming; flee the wrath of God. There is nothing here to feed the dark fantasies of twisted minds. What God has decided, he will do, and the nature of his judgment we leave in his sovereign hands. But if we insist on making explicit what God has deliberately left open, we become like ancient Egyptian topographers of the underworld—drawing maps of places we know nothing about.

THE METAPHORICAL VIEW

In teaching, as in preaching, concrete images are preferable to abstract allusions. Pictures bring home the point. That is why conceptual references to heaven and hell have little impact. To assure someone that righteous living will blossom in bountiful blessings may be alliterative, but is not nearly as effective as saying that one day Christians will walk streets of gold or that God will wipe all tears from their eyes. These are images that bring comfort in the bleak moments of life.

Put differently, we must be careful not to confuse the vehicle that brings truth with the message. As we saw, people in the first century often used hyperbole, or colorful language, to bring truth home. So also with the images used to describe heaven and hell: Vivid, everyday language of the first century is used to communicate the joys and sorrows of these two ultimate destinations.

Heaven. When we examine the description of heaven, we find it pictured the way we would expect first-century people to picture it (how else would they describe the heavenly city but in terms familiar to them?). Until the time of gunpowder, cities were surrounded with thick walls and sturdy gates, and inscriptions were commonly placed on or over the gates. So in Revelation we find “a great, high wall with twelve gates” (21:12), and the thickness of the walls were vast, measuring about two hundred feet (v. 17). Of course, there would be no need in heaven to have walls, but that is the way it is pictured nonetheless. On the gates were inscribed “the names of the twelve tribes of Israel” (v. 12), and on the foundations were “the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (v. 14). The walls themselves were made of jasper and were built on a foundation “decorated with every kind of precious stone” (v. 19). Twelve of these precious stones are mentioned: jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoptase, jacinth, and amethyst (vv. 19–20). “Each gate,” we are told, was “made of a single pearl” (v. 21), and “the great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass” (v. 21).

Today we would never describe a great city—like Paris, for example—as having walls and gates. But they would in antiquity; every city they ever knew had walls. To demonstrate that the eternal city has no need of protection, the writer pictures the gates as continually open (v. 25); and since it is a perfect city, its dimensions form a perfect cube (vv. 16–17). The city’s beauty is described in many ways. Every conceivable precious stone is used in building the heavenly city, with the more valuable ones listed. Yet the stone we now cherish the most—the diamond—is absent. No doubt diamonds were overlooked because, while they were known in ancient times, they were little used. The hard carbon was simply too difficult to cut and polish. Platinum also is omitted; it was unknown until the sixteenth century. Pearls, on the other hand, were among the most important adornments in antiquity. These were worn on the red sandals of Roman senators—the so-called masters of the world. But one day, says John, the most lowly of God’s servants will rest in the shadow of massive gates constructed from a single pearl.

Heaven also is described as a place of rest (Heb. 3–4). Today, in the age of meaningful employment and leisure time activities, eternal rest might sound insignificant (what will we do up there?), but when people worked from dawn till dusk simply to feed themselves, the image of eternal sabbaths struck a responsive chord. Laborers in Jesus’ day never took rest for granted, nor did they assume daily bread was their rightful due. (We in the West have so much food the task is how to avoid it.) So to announce that the endless delights of heaven would begin with a sumptuous feast (Rev. 19:6–9) was a picture of inexpressible happiness. Similarly, what could be more meaningful to people living in dark, one-room houses than to describe heaven as a place filled with light and space (John 14:2; Rev. 21:10–27)? Heaven was the fulfillment of every dream. The kings of this earth might possess a few trinkets of gold, but one day the faithful will walk on golden streets so wondrous that the light of heaven will shine through the gold as if it were glass. The saints, we are told, will drink from a sparkling river and eat from the tree of life that bears twelve kinds of fruit and produces leaves that heal the nations (Rev. 22:1–3).

Does this sound like a literal place? Or does God communicate truth to people in ways they can understand at their particular time in history? The apostle Paul thinks of the coming world as entirely different from the present: “For this world in its present form (*skema*) is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). When discussing the resurrection body he again stresses how different heavenly things

will be from what we see on earth (1 Cor. 15:35–49). And he realizes that the world above is cloaked in obscurity: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly (*ainigmati*), but then we will see face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12, NRSV). The word Paul uses for “dim” is *ainigma*, the same word we use for enigma or riddle. For Paul, the things of heaven are a riddle; he sees them, but only dimly.

C. H. Dodd suggests that Paul “shared with many of his contemporaries the belief that . . . the material universe would be transfigured into a substance consisting of pure light or glory, thus returning to its original perfection as created by God.” Even the possibility of such a transfiguration should caution us not to set our minds too firmly on a material heaven that parallels earth. Heaven is not earth dressed in its Sunday best; it is quite different.

In Revelation, John’s vision is symbolic, but the intent is clear. Heaven is the perfect state where there is no need for the sun or moon to shine, for the radiance of God will fill the city (Rev. 21:23–24). Heaven, it turns out, is beyond our wildest imaginings, our fondest dreams. To describe it we must think of the most beautiful things on earth and multiply them a hundredfold, and still we cannot begin to grasp its beauty. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

Hell. If heaven is described in the most powerful images available to people of that day, the same is true with hell, only with reverse implications. The images we find are shocking, and again the intent is clear. Hell is a place of profound misery where the wicked are banished from the presence of God.

In the New Testament the final destination of the wicked is pictured as a place of blazing sulfur, where the burning smoke ascends forever. This would have been an effective image because sulfur fires were part of life for those who lived in the Jerusalem of Bible times. Southwest of the city was the Valley of Hinnom, an area that had a long history of desecration. The steep gorge was once used to burn children in sacrifice to the Ammonite god Molech (2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 7:31; 32:35). Jeremiah denounced such practices by saying that Hinnom Valley would become the valley of God’s judgment, a place of slaughter (Jer. 7:32; 19:5–7). As the years passed, a sense of foreboding hung over the valley. People began to bum their garbage and offal there, using sulfur, the flammable substance we now use in matches and gunpowder. Eventually, the Hebrew name *ge-hinnom* (canyon of Hinnom) evolved into *gehenna* (*gehenna*), the familiar Greek word for hell (Matt. 5:22, 29; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33; Mark 9:43, 45; Luke 12:5). Thus when the Jews talked about punishment in the next life, what better image could they use than the smoldering valley they called *gehenna*?

In the intertestamental period, *gehenna* was widely used as a metaphor for hell, the place of eternal damnation. Later, in rabbinic literature, we find *gehenna* given a location—in the depths of the earth, and sometimes in Africa beyond the Mountains of Darkness. Some Jews, of course, took the fiery images literally, supposing that Hinnom Valley itself would become the place of hellfire and judgment (1 Enoch 27:1–2; 54:1–6; 56:3–4; 90:26–28; 4 Ezra 7:36). But this view was minor and not widely held in Judaism. The New Testament also rejects this view, saying that *gehenna* is already in some sense prepared elsewhere (Matt. 25:41), just as heaven is (Matt. 25:34; John 14:2; Heb. 11:16).

When Jesus talks about hell, he often uses *gehenna* and the hellenistic term *hades* (Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23) to dramatize hell’s suffering. Behind these two words is the image of fire, a picture often used to describe hell in antiquity. In Matthew 13:49–50 Jesus talks about the Last Judgment:

This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Again, in Revelation, we find at the conclusion of the Great White Throne Judgment: “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (20:15). Should we take these words as indicating a literal, fiery abyss? Or as a severe, though unspecified judgment awaiting the wicked?

The strongest reason for taking them as metaphors is the conflicting language used in the New Testament to describe hell. How could hell be literal fire when it is also described as darkness (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17; Jude 14)? Those who raise this question have a good point. Fire and darkness are mutually exclusive terms, but as we have seen, they are often juxtaposed in Jewish writings (Qumran, 1QS 2:8; 4:13; 1 Enoch 103:7; 2 Enoch 10:2; Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 6:1, 49d). The point is that when it comes to God’s wrath at the end of time, Jewish writers are not concerned with seeming conflicts; they can describe punishment in many ways because they have no clear scheme as to what form it will take. For example, they often talk of hell as a place where the bodies of the wicked burn eternally, even though at the same time they are said to be rotting away with worms and maggots (Judith 16:17; Sirach 7:17; cf. Isa. 66:24). The author of 2 Enoch 10:2 even links “black fire” with “cold ice” in the place of eternal torment. What these writers are trying to do is paint the most awful picture of hell they can, no matter how incompatible the images might be. Yet of this they are certain: God will forever punish those who walk in the paths of wickedness.

With this being said, let us ask the more pertinent question: Did the New Testament writers intend their words to be taken literally? Certainly, Jude did not. He describes hell as “eternal fire” in verse 7, and then further depicts it as the “blackest darkness” (*zophos tou skotous*) in verse 13. A similar thing could be said for Matthew when we compare “fire” (3:10, 12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8–9; 25:41) with “darkness” (8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Moreover, a combination of fire and darkness is complicated by the encompassing picture of a “lake of fire” (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8). The blackest darkness is hardly compatible with a vast lake of fire. From this point alone we would do well to refrain from depicting hell as a literal fire.

Fire and darkness, of course, are not the only images we have of hell in the New Testament. The wicked are said to weep and gnash their teeth (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28), their worm never dies (Mark 9:48), and they are beaten with many blows (Luke 12:47). No one thinks hell will involve actual beatings or is a place where the maggots of the dead achieve immortality. Equally, no one thinks that gnashing teeth is anything other than an image of hell’s grim reality. In the past some have wondered about people who enter hell toothless. How will they grind their teeth? In 1950, Professor Coleman-Norton at Princeton University tried to provide an answer to this momentous question in an article entitled, “An Amusing *Agraphon*.” He claimed to have found, in a Morocco mosque during the Second World War, a Greek fragment containing Matthew 24:51, “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” When one of the disciples asks how this can be for those without teeth, Jesus replies, “Teeth will be provided.” “However amusing one may regard this account,” comments Bruce Metzger, “there is no doubt at all that the *agraphon* is a forgery.” Before the war, says Metzger, Coleman-Norton often told the story “about dentures being provided in the next world so that all the damned might be able to weep and gnash their teeth.”

Questions about whether the damned will have literal teeth or about worms and beatings are, of course, quite useless. The apostle Paul grew impatient with similar questions from opponents at Corinth (1 Cor. 15:35–38). Not believing in the resurrection of the body, these opponents mocked the tiny Christian community and demanded to know what kind of body Christians expected to get in heaven. Paul replied in the strongest way possible, saying in effect: Anyone who asks such a

question is an utter fool (*aphron*). The point is that God does what he pleases, and it does not please God to provide endless details to satisfy the curious or the argumentative. People in the next life will have spiritual bodies quite different from their present earthly ones (Acts 24:15; 1 Cor. 15:35–50).

And this raises a further question. The eternal fire was created for spirit beings such as the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). How then will people with spirit bodies (and disembodied spirits such as demons) be affected by a physical fire? Physical fire works on physical bodies with physical nerve endings, not on spirit beings. Perhaps the fire is in some sense a spiritual fire. This gets us back to Billy Graham's comment that hell might be better understood as a terrible eternal burning within the hearts of the lost for God, a fire that can never be quenched.

When we take into account the various images that describe hell and couple them with what seems unequivocally to be metaphorical language used for heaven, we see that God has not given us a complete picture of the afterlife. As always, God communicates to people in ways they can understand. He uses the language and images of the day to disclose truth. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find heaven described as an ancient city, adorned with the treasures of the world. Similarly, it is quite natural for Jewish people to use regional designations like *gehenna* when referring to final punishment.

Hell, then, should not be pictured as an inferno belching fire like Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. The most we can say is that the rebellious will be cast from the presence of God, without any hope of restoration. Like Adam and Eve they will be driven away, but this time into "eternal night," where joy and hope are forever lost.

ANNIHILATION OF THE WICKED

To conclude, as I have above, that the wicked will be forever banished from the presence of God is somber indeed. Whatever their punishment, wherever they are sent, the final judgment cannot be anything but laden with sorrow. Even if we were to adopt C. S. Lewis's position that hell contains relative pleasures for the damned, still, hell would rank as the worst possible place—beyond our darkest imaginings. Lewis has suggested that pleasure in hell might not be so out of line with Christian tradition as we might think.

Even if it were possible that the experience ... of the lost contained no pain and much pleasure, still, that black pleasure would be such as to send any soul, not already damned, flying to its prayers in nightmare terror.

What Lewis is talking about is the pain of missing heaven, or in the language of medieval scholastics, *poena damni*. This kind of torment comes not from active punishment inflicted by God—like flames scorching the skin—but from having no contact with the One who is the source of all peace. On the Judgment Day the wicked are separated from the righteous like chaff from grain, and they are carried far from the beauty and glory of God into a land of shadows where they contemplate what might have been. They are in the true sense of the word, lost forever. "Sad, sad, that bitter wail," says the hymnwriter, "Almost, but lost."

Because the idea of a never-ending punishment is so harsh, even in Lewis's form, a number of evangelicals have called for a reconsideration of the doctrine. In its place they have proposed that we embrace conditional immortality or, as it is often called, annihilationism. This view can be structured in many ways, but the essential point is that the wicked pass out of existence rather than endure eternal, conscious punishment in the next life.

It is common to condemn proponents of annihilationism by linking them with sects that believe in the extinction of the wicked after death, like Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians. If some evangelicals are beginning to deny the existence of hell, they are probably no better than the cults, or so the reasoning goes. The parallel is interesting but says little. After all, even false prophets teach some truth; that is what makes them deceptive. The question is whether the particular doctrine at issue—annihilationism—is faithful to the Scriptures.

One caution is perhaps warranted. When someone proposes to change a doctrine taught consistently since the inception of the church, it should make us wonder how everyone throughout the centuries could have been so terribly wrong. Not that an error could not have been made or that traditions are infallible. They are not, of course. In fact, the position I hold, suggesting a metaphorical understanding of hell rather than a place of literal heat and smoke, should raise similar caution. Actually, it has been advocated only since the sixteenth century. The true test is how well the view conforms with the biblical data.

The Problem of Harmony. As I have said, the significant point of the annihilationist view is that the wicked will not endure an eternal hell; they will simply be extinguished. If this were not so, say the annihilationists, how could there be harmony in the cosmos? When God creates a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 65:17; Rom. 8:19–23), is it not reasonable to expect the whole creation to be at peace with God? If somewhere, in some dark corner of the universe, there are still rebellious or suffering creatures gnashing their teeth, how can this be considered harmony?

This is a reasonable argument, but an argument that better suits universalism than it does annihilationism. The logic of harmony at the end of time would suggest that God will gather *all* his creation into one big harmonious family, rather than setting up a cosmic scaffold on the Judgment Day to dispatch masses of people into oblivion.

In any case, the problem with this kind of argument is that it imposes present-day expectations on ancient writers. The annihilationists suppose that a new heaven and a new earth should produce harmony, or else the renovation is somehow incomplete. To annihilationists it seems ludicrous to say that God will renovate nature, yet still have sinners languishing in hell. But the Jewish writers of late antiquity do not follow this line of reasoning. It matters little whether the wicked are destroyed, plunged into hell, or otherwise shriveled into insignificance. They never suggest that harmony must come from annihilation as opposed to eternal suffering. Put bluntly, harmony comes when evil is removed—notwithstanding the method. To them the wicked are hostile elements, intrusions that mar the landscape of God's renovation. When judgment finally comes, the wicked are cast aside, and that is all that matters.

The writer of 2 Baruch is typical: "The coming world will be given to these [the righteous], but the habitation of the many others will be in the fire" (44:15). Later he becomes more specific, saying that the souls of the wicked will shrivel into "horrible shapes" and "will waste away even more.... then they will go away to be tormented" (51:5–6). The righteous, on the other hand, are "full of joy" (14:13) in anticipation of being changed "into the splendor of angels" (51:5).

At Qumran the sect members can talk about eternal punishment and annihilation at the same time, leaving today's readers to ponder their view on the fate of the wicked:

... everlasting damnation by the avenging wrath of the fury of God, eternal torment and endless disgrace together with shameful extinction in the fire of the dark regions (1QS 4:12–13).

Without elaborating, it is sufficient to say that concerning the time of the renovation, the standard belief in all sectors of Judaism was that harmony would come when the perpetrators of wickedness were punished, whether by annihilation or eternal torment. To them, harmony came with the

removal of the wicked. Today's annihilationists might not think the cosmos could be harmonious with the existence of hell, but this was of no concern to the ancient Jews. If the question of harmony was a non-issue in Judaism, it is likely that the same was true for the biblical writers. They could easily have held to an eternal, conscious hell with no thought that such a belief would mar the harmony of the final cosmos.

Second-Century Christians. We now turn to the question of what Scripture writers thought about the fate of the wicked. Did they assume that an evil life ended in annihilation, or in eternal, conscious suffering? An examination of the background literature surrounding the Bible is of limited help because Jewish writings contain texts that support both annihilationism and eternal torment.³⁹ But which line do the biblical writers observe?

One way of approaching this question is to examine what Christians believed at the close of the New Testament period. If these second-century Christians held consistently to one view or the other, we could reasonably conclude that the same view would have been espoused a generation or two earlier by New Testament writers.

In fact, the testimony in the first half of the second century is consistent concerning the destiny of the wicked. During the time of the early Apostolic Fathers, Christians believed hell would be a place of eternal, conscious punishment. In Ignatius of Antioch's letter *To the Ephesians* (ca. A.D. 117) we read: "Such a one shall go in his foulness to the unquenchable fire" (16:2). Likewise, in the *Epistle to Diognetus* (ca. A.D. 138) we read:

... when you fear the death which is real, which is kept for those that shall be condemned to the everlasting fire, which shall punish up to the end those that were delivered to it. Then you will marvel at those who endure for the sake of righteousness the fire which is for a season (10:7–8).

And 2 *Clement* reads (ca. A.D. 150):

Nothing shall rescue us from eternal punishment, if we neglect his commandments (6:7).

And again:

... when they see those who have done amiss, and denied Jesus by word or deed, are punished with terrible torture in unquenchable fire (17:7).

Finally, in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (ca. A.D. 156–60) we read:

And the fire of their cruel torturers had no heat for them, for they set before their eyes an escape from the fire which is everlasting and is never quenched (2:3).

And again:

You threaten with the fire that bums for a time, and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire which awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment (11:2).

Unfortunately, even these texts do not seem sufficient to convince annihilationists that early Christians assumed that endless punishment would fall on the wicked. Annihilationists often construct awkward scenarios where the wicked are consumed but the fire bums forever, or where the wicked suffer greatly but temporarily in an unquenchable fire. To solve a problem they construct a fire that rages on endlessly, even though the wicked would have been consumed during the first moments of eternity. Is this what the second-century writers were trying to say? That the wicked will be destroyed in eternal, indestructible fires? Or were they following that line of thought that speaks of eternal, conscious punishment for the wicked?

It seems to me that some annihilationists look for any straw in the wind to keep from admitting that early Christians affirmed eternal, conscious punishment. Yet during the same period as Ignatius's *Ephesians* and other writings such as *Diognetus*, *2 Clement*, and *Polycarp*, we have clear testimony in another document, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, that a segment of Christian society did indeed hold to an eternal hell of suffering. This work, alluded to at the outset of this chapter, talks about gnashing of teeth and death by devouring fire (even though the wicked often suffer fates unrelated to burning). The *Apocalypse* might be faulted for its grisly details of hell's agony, with blasphemers hanging by their tongues—and other horrors—but it certainly has nothing to do with annihilation. The wicked suffer consciously and eternally (chap. 6).

I have separated the *Apocalypse of Peter* from what is usually called the Apostolic Fathers because it belongs to a body of literature known as apocryphal apocalypses. Nevertheless, it is important because it was written somewhere between A.D. 125 and 150, was held in high esteem, and was considered by many to be part of the New Testament canon. Moreover, it is only one of many Christian apocalypses that insist on an eternal hell of conscious suffering. There can be no doubt that early in the second century, Christians believed in an eternal, conscious hell, and it would be reasonable to conclude that Ignatius's *Ephesians*, as well as *Diognetus*, *2 Clement*, and *Polycarp*, are further examples of this belief. Not much more than a generation after the writing of Matthew and Revelation, with their dire warnings to the wicked, we find not annihilation but an eternal hell, as the accepted belief for the punishment of the ungodly.

If the dominant view of Christians a generation after the New Testament was eternal suffering, what possibly could have altered their supposed annihilationism? Jewish influences? Hellenistic encroachments? With respect to Jewish influences, we know that the rabbis, with few exceptions, believed hell was eternal torment. But influences of this sort are exceedingly difficult to evaluate; some think Christian apocalyptic theology influenced the Jewish.⁴⁶ Whatever the case, it would be odd for second-century Christians to abandon so quickly the supposed annihilationist teachings of Christ and the apostles.

Hellenistic encroachments are often suggested as the reason for the post-New Testament church's belief in eternal suffering. Annihilationists sometimes argue that after the New Testament, Greek influences of *hades* and the immortality of the soul crept into the church. Edward Fudge writes:

Many Christian writers of the second and third centuries ... wrapped their understanding of Scripture in the robes of philosophy. Paul had often warned against contemporary philosophy (1 Cor. 1:19–2:5; Col. 2:1–10), but these apologists, zealous for their new-found faith, set out to battle the pagan thinkers on their own turf.

There is no doubt that second-century Christian apologists drew heavily on Greek philosophy, especially on the philosophy of the Cynics, to support the Christian position. But Fudge makes it sound as if we have a struggle between Paul, the Hebraic-minded Jew, and post-New Testament hellenists. In fact, Paul himself was heavily influenced by hellenism, as was every Jew in Palestine during the first century. "In Hellenistic-Roman times," says Martin Hengel, "Jerusalem was an 'international city,' in which representatives of the Diaspora throughout the world met together." In short, says Hengel, "*Palestinian Judaism must be regarded as Hellenistic Judaism.*" We need to be careful, therefore, not to suggest that the New Testament writers looked through Jewish Old Testament eyes when in fact their literature, education, culture, philosophy, and language were thoroughly permeated with Greek thought.

First-century Pharisees. Too often annihilationists minimize the extent of hellenization during the first century. They think the second-century movement of Christians toward the Greek doctrine of the immortal soul began only after the New Testament was written. But already in the first century we know that the Pharisees—of which Paul was one—had absorbed the doctrine of immortality. Josephus comments on the Pharisees:

They believe that souls have power to survive death and that there are rewards and punishments under the earth for those who have led lives of virtue or vice: eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage to a new life (*Antiquities* 8.14).

Every soul, they maintain, is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone passes into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment (*War* 2.163).

We cannot say that New Testament writers endorsed the Platonic or Pharisaic belief in a never-dying soul. If this were the case, annihilationism as a view would be impossible to maintain because the soul in every human would simply exist forever, whether in heaven or in hell. In the New Testament, however, we find the Hebrew belief in the resurrection of the dead rather than the Greek immortality of the soul (1 Cor. 15:53–55; cf. Dan. 12:2). The Pharisees believed in the resurrection as well, but only for the righteous; yet they still expected the souls of the wicked to be punished eternally. Their view combined the Greek idea of immortality with the Hebrew doctrine of resurrection.

The apostles taught that everyone, whether good or evil, would be resurrected (John 5:29; Acts 24:15; cf. Dan. 12:2); they did not suggest the soul had some special substance that made it eternal. Yet it is clear from the New Testament that both the righteous and the wicked are destined to exist forever—even though the precise nature of the resurrected bodies is not always clear. All things depend on God for their existence, and it is God who resurrects and sustains his creatures, some unto life in heaven, and some unto death—in the place we call hell.

It is important to remember that the largest and most popular group of Jews in first-century Palestine were Pharisees—and they taught the imperishability of the soul. So when Jesus warns about the coming destruction in the afterlife, he does so to a Pharisaic audience. We ask ourselves, therefore, what the Pharisaic crowds would think Jesus meant when he said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell” (Luke 12:4–5). Matthew 10:28 puts it differently: “Be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” These words meant something to the hearers. Would they really have been thinking that destruction in hell meant annihilation when they thought in terms of imperishable souls? And would Jesus have been so sloppy, here and elsewhere, that he never quite got his meaning across?

The point is that the imagery of hellfire must be interpreted in light of the hellenism of the first century. It is not enough for annihilationists to argue from the Old Testament (which they think has no concept of unending punishment for the wicked) to the New Testament (in which they conclude the same). Nor is it wise to import wholesale the contexts of the Old Testament into the New. For example, just because the undying worm in Isaiah 66:24 feeds on dead bodies is insufficient reason to say that the undying worm image in Mark 9:48 must relate to dead (annihilated) creatures. About 150 B.C. the Jewish composer of Judith (16:17) uses Isaiah’s worm image to say that the wicked will suffer *eternal* pain. From the first century on, the fire and worms of Isaiah are commonly placed in hell, inflicting pain on the wicked who suffer eternally. The important thing in interpreting any ancient text is to give proper weight to the meaning of words in the time period in which they are used.

Thus the Pharisees can be strong supporters of the Old Testament, but still embrace eternal, conscious punishment. The Christians in the early second century also can have a high view of the Old Testament, but ardently preach eternal, conscious suffering.

Hell in Scripture. Before we discuss texts supporting eternal, conscious suffering, a word needs to be said about interpretation. The problem is that texts can be interpreted in many ways, as the various positions in this book amply show. Also, evidence for the correct position is never one hundred percent on one side and zero on the other. There must always be some reason for a conclusion, or nobody would be foolish enough to believe it. But we should be wary of arguments that rely on what is *possible*, rather than what is probable in light of the evidence. The people who wrote the New Testament used ordinary language and images of the first century to communicate their message, and they never expected scholars thousands of years later to be looking for *possible* interpretations. True, sometimes their message was misunderstood (1 Cor. 5:9–13), but it usually came across reasonably clear. So our task is to determine the everyday perspective concerning the fate of the wicked during the first century.

When we read about the plight of the rich man in hell (Luke 16:19–31), we find a typical Jewish text with strong hellenistic flavorings. The imagery of the beggar, Lazarus, resting with Abraham in heaven, while the rich man suffers in a “place of torment,” conforms well with a hell of conscious suffering, and it would be understood as such by all. There is no thought of annihilation here, but a place of punishment. Of course, the Greek word used in Luke 16 is *hades*, and in Christian tradition, *hades* will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13–14), a euphemism for *gehenna*. For evangelical annihilationists this means that the wicked will suffer in *hades* for a season, and then destruction will follow in the lake of fire.

It is quite a large step, I think, for annihilationists to concede that there will be a temporary hell where suffering takes place. (Of course, it is almost impossible to understand the story in any other way.) It would be much cleaner for annihilationists to call the Lazarus story a parable that has no relation to reality. They could then have some kind of soul sleep for the wicked, followed by judgment and finally extermination. As it is, a temporary hell lessens annihilationism’s moral argument somewhat that God is a loving God who would never put people in a place of torment. I suppose they could respond that a thousand years (or even ten thousand) in a short-term hell can never be compared to eternal pain. This has merit, but a hell of punishment—albeit temporary—does show the awful nature of sin from God’s point of view. Both traditionalists and annihilationists would agree that arrogant sin is so offensive to the Creator that he consigns rebellious sinners to an intermediate hell of suffering (*hades*) that lasts in some cases thousands of years. The question is how we should take *gehenna* (the lake of fire). Is it a place of extended suffering or annihilation?

There is no doubt that the New Testament writers expected extended suffering to take place in the next age. We saw that in Mark’s use of the worm image of Isaiah 66:24:

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell [*gehenna*], where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:47–48).

The phrase “it is better for you” reads like Jesus’ comment about Judas, “Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born” (Matt. 26:24). There is something about the fate of evildoers that is worse than death. In the first century, that “fate” was well understood: They called it *gehenna*, the second death. And just as the worms devoured rotting flesh in the physical Valley of Gehenna, so will they be present metaphorically in the eternal

gehenna, where they will not die and where the fire is not quenched. This might be an odd image for us today, and we might be tempted to twist it in a number of directions, but the meaning for first-century people was clear. In hellenistic times it referred to suffering in hell. As Martha Himmelfarb says in her impressive study of apocalyptic texts, “At the beginning of the common era the fire and worms of Isaiah have been unambiguously placed in hell.”

In another text, Matthew 13:49–50, Jesus says:

This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The image of the wicked weeping and gnashing their teeth is common in the New Testament (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). What is not common is the interpretation placed on these texts by the annihilationists. They think the agony depicted occurs shortly before the wicked are extinguished. Sometimes they point to Psalm 112:10: “The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away,” as if this verse has something to do with the “fiery furnace” in Matthew where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The people listening to Jesus, and later reading the New Testament record of his sayings, were well acquainted with the idea of a fiery hell. They used the word *hades*, with all its hellenistic implications, for the intermediate state, and the smoldering Gehenna Valley to represent the eternal hell. When they heard about gnashing of teeth in the fiery furnace, they quite naturally thought about eternal, conscious punishment, since that was the usual teaching of the day. Less than two generations after Matthew’s gospel, the Christian *Sibylline Oracles* (ca. A.D. 150) talk about the wicked in *gehenna* gnashing their teeth and calling out for death, but death will not come (2:290–310). If Matthew had wanted his readers to understand that gnashing of teeth in the furnace of fire was annihilation, he would have had to explain this to his audience or risk being misunderstood.

There is another troubling aspect of annihilationism. The view does not adequately address the New Testament texts that talk about gradations of punishment in hell.

That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows (Luke 12:47–48).

Again:

But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you (Matt 11:24; cf. Rev. 20:11–12).

The Pharisaic-minded crowds, who believed in eternal suffering for the wicked, could not mistake what Jesus meant. Even the most vile people, he was saying, would receive a lesser sentence in the afterlife than they who had received and rejected so much truth. In other words, what you sow, you reap. If you are exceedingly evil, you will be punished exceedingly; if your sin is less, your punishment will be less when God sentences you on the Judgment Day. Annihilationism fits rather awkwardly here. It has no sense of distributive justice—Heinrich Himmler and Mahatma Gandhi receive the same punishment.

Annihilationists might respond that certain evildoers will simply suffer longer, or more intensely, before being extinguished. The problem is that the setting for the gradations of punishment in Luke 12:47–48 is *gehenna* (12:5). So now we have extended suffering in the final abode of the wicked. If we were to ask which line of Jewish eschatological punishment this fits

better with—annihilationism or eternal, conscious suffering—the answer would surely be the latter. The truth is that when punishment is administered according to the depth of sin, the presumption is that the wicked will suffer for an extended time—presumably forever. For example, in the *Sibylline Oracles* noted above (2:290–310), the wicked must pay “threefold” for the evil deeds they have committed. The more evil committed, the more suffering in the next life. And their anguish in *gehenna* never ends. This is precisely the point mentioned in Matthew and Luke sixty years or so earlier. Hell is a dreadful place, but not a place of equal suffering. Some will receive lesser punishment, some more.

If gradations of punishment assume extended suffering in *gehenna*—probably endless suffering—the next two texts underscore the eternal nature of the sinner’s fate.

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life (Matt. 25:46).

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power (2 Thess. 1:8–9).

I have already shown that the dominant view among Christians in the early second century was eternal, conscious torment. Eternal torment was also the belief held by the popular party of the Pharisees in the first century. It is into this context that the above two sayings come. When annihilationists confront these texts, they often suggest ingenious linguistic solutions which, at best, fall prey to what J. I. Packer calls “avalanche-dodging.”

Naturally, when we interpret a verse, the object is not to wring out every *possible* meaning and then choose one that best fits our view. The object is to see how a word or phrase is used in its literary and historical context. Before we encounter Matthew’s record that the wicked will receive eternal punishment while the righteous receive eternal life, we have his discussion of gradations of punishment in hell and his sixfold warning that those who persist in evil will weep and gnash their teeth in the furnace of fire. Surely eternal punishment is balanced with eternal life: the wicked will suffer eternally, according to the extent of their sin; the righteous receive eternal life.

Turning to Paul, when he says that the wicked will be “punished with everlasting destruction,” we ask what the normal meaning would have been for him and his readers. Paul, as a former Pharisee, would have believed in eternal, conscious torment for the souls of the wicked. Luke reports that Paul the Christian expected the wicked to receive a resurrected body (Acts 24:15), so if he retained something of his Pharisaic belief, he thought the wicked would be given resurrected bodies fitted for their sojourn in hell.

But perhaps Paul no longer held the Pharisaic belief in conscious suffering for the wicked. In this case we should find some evidence somewhere to show either that he abandoned his old belief or that he had taken on a new-found understanding that evildoers would be annihilated. As it is, he speaks just as if he had never abandoned his old view. He tells people on the Greek mainland, who no doubt were heavily influenced by ideas of the immortal soul, that the wicked will be punished with *olethron aionion* (eternal destruction). When we find similar expressions elsewhere (4 Macc. 9:9; 10:15; cf. Jubilees 36:10), they mean eternal destruction in a hell of conscious suffering.

Finally, in Revelation 14:10–11 we find a deeply disturbing picture of one who rejects God. “He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.” John continues, stressing that the damned will suffer eternal, conscious torment: “And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image.” The book of Revelation has many images and symbols that should not be taken literally, but the intention in this passage is clear. The damned will suffer eternally and

consciously. They will have no rest, day or night. As God “lives for ever and ever” (4:9), so will the damned suffer “for ever and ever” (14:11).

Annihilationists often suggest that John meant there will be no rest and much suffering “while it continues.” The phrase “for ever and ever” refers to the smoke image, a silent witness to the power of God’s judgment on the wicked: they are extinguished, never to rise again. But is this what the normal reader at the close of the first century would think when reading these words? When I hear explanations of this sort, I begin to wonder how any document in antiquity could be said to endorse eternal, conscious torment. Again, when one examines a passage, the question is not whether an interpretation is *possible*; it is whether it is *probable* in the context. Here John says that “the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night.” If we were to ask what tradition Revelation follows, annihilationism or conscious suffering, the answer again can only be the latter.

Later in the book of Revelation, John describes the Holy City and the glory awaiting believers.

The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.... They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever (Rev. 22:3–5).

Shortly after this John mentions those who are outside the city, banished from the presence of God in the place he calls the lake of fire. “Outside are the dogs,” he says, “those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (22:15). These evildoers still exist, still suffer somewhere “outside” the gates of heaven. John calls the place of murderers, sorcerers, and idolaters, “the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (21:8, NRSV).

The images of heaven and hell are not to be taken literally, as if there were real gates of pearl and material smoke and flames. The writers use common, everyday images to impress on their readers the reality of the next age. Heaven and hell are real; one a place of immeasurable happiness, the other of profound misery.⁴

⁴ Crockett, W. V. (1996). [The Metaphorical View](#). In S. N. Gundry & W. Crockett (Eds.), *Four Views on Hell* (pp. 41–76). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

**Figure
Viewed
Position**

**MITIGATING THE
FIRES OF HELL!**

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell’s Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure**

Alternative To Forced Choice In Absolute Interpretation Of Ultimate Reality Claims:

- Historically – Average Christians Have Privately Recorded - In Letters & Diary – Personal Convictions Held Along A Literalistic-Symbolic Continuum – Not An Heartfelt Either/Or Situation As To Actual Belief.
- Martin Luther Said: “It is not very important whether or not one pictures hell as it commonly portrayed and described” and he further states that the artistic portrayals of literal hellfire were to him as something of “no value.”
- John Calvin Commented That The Eternal Fire Of Matthew 3: 12 Is Better Understood Metaphorically.
- Billy Graham Confided In Interview: “I have often wondered if hell is a terrible burning within our hearts for God, to fellowship with God, a fire that we can never quench.”
- Kenneth Kantzer – Editor Of *Christianity Today* Said: “The Bible makes it clear that hell is real and it’s bad. But when Jesus spoke of flames...these are most likely figurative warnings.”

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell’s Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure**

Alternative To Forced Choice In Absolute Interpretation Of Ultimate Reality Claims:

- Early Christian Apocryphal Literature Depicted Measured & Proximate Punishments: *“Blasphemers hanging by their tongues...Slanderers chew their tongues, hot irons burn their eyes...Murderers are cast into pits with venomous snakes, and worms fill their bodies. Women who had abortions sit neck deep in the excretions of the damned. Those who chatted idly during church stand in a pool of burning sulphur and pitch...Those who turned their backs on God are burned and baked slowly in the fires of hell.”* 4 Views On Hell, pgs. 46 & 47
- According To The 2nd Century Critic Of Christianity Named Simply Celsus: *“God becomes the cosmic cook!”* (same reference, same page) ...
- Poetry Of 14th Century Further Elaborated As Illustrated In Dante’s Inferno Where *“the damned writhe and scream...with loud wails of sinners boiling in blood, terrified and naked people running from hordes of biting snakes, and lands of heavy darkness and dense fog... people must endure thick burning smoke that chars their nostrils, and some remain forever trapped in lead cloaks...”*

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell’s Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure**

Alternative To Forced Choice In Absolute Interpretation Of Ultimate Reality Claims:

- Protestants Of The 18th Century Contributed Even More Theological Speculation Of Descriptive Detail; Prominent Was New England Puritan Jonathan Edwards: *“The body will be full of torment as full as it can hold, and every part of it shall be full of torment. They shall be in extreme pain, every joint of ‘em, every nerve shall be full of inexpressible torment. They shall be tormented even to their fingers’ ends. The whole body shall be full of the wrath of God...”*
- Latter Literature – According To These Writers – Through The Waking Nightmare - Targeted The Complacent - Purposing To Produce In Them – Genuine Repentance.
- First Century - Original Intent Of Images - Were As Means To Teach Truths Of Cause & Effect – Afterlife Consequences Of Sinful Behaviors.
- Approved Method Of Instruction For Those Audiences That Were Familiar With The Represented Imagery & Understood It Did Not Reflect Concrete Realities
- Scriptures Teach There Is A Real Hell – A Place Of Frightful Judgment!

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell’s Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure**

Alternative To Forced Choice In Absolute Interpretation Of Ultimate Reality Claims:

- Difficulties Only Occur When We Construct Layers Of Our Own Imagination Upon This Firm Foundation; We Are Then Adding To Scripture & Entering Into Forbidden Territory; The Bible Is Sufficient To Warn Of Spiritual Dangers & Sinful Consequence – It Does Not Need Help!
- Symbolism Of Rabbinic Hyperbole Can Often Be Detected By The Application Of Mutually Exclusive Terms & Almost Automatically Indicated By Utilization Of Colorful Contradictory Images
- By Paying Attention To The Contexts, We Can Avoid Overliteralizing On The One Hand, Or Diluting The Meaning Of Scripture On The Other.
- Fire In Jewish & Early Christian Writings Was Imagery Routinely Resourced To Evoke Emotions Of Seriousness & Reverence – Not Of The Material Element
- Rather, 1st Century Audiences Contextually Linked It To God’s Burning Wrath!
- If We Try To Squeeze Images That Were Meant To Taken As Metaphor Into Literal Molds, We Ill Serve The Cause Of Christ.

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell’s Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure**

Alternative To Forced Choice In Absolute Interpretation Of Ultimate Reality Claims:

- Far From Helping, Our Fanciful Theories About **Roaring Flames** Awaiting Unbelievers At Life’s End – Simply Hinder The Gospel Message.
- The Literal View, In Its Desire To Be Faithful To The Bible, Makes The Bible Say Too Much.
- Our Responsibility Is To Preach & Teach What We Know, Not To Go Beyond The Information Revealed In Scripture.
- The Problem Is Really One Of Misplaced Literalism; If By Literal We Mean To Take The Text For What It Really Is, Would That Not Mean That We Read A Poem As A Poem, A Fable As A Fable, & Historical Narrative As History Note?
- If We Insist On Making Explicit What God Has Deliberately Left Open, We Become Like The Classic Pagan & Medieval Topographers Of The Underworld – Drawing Imaginary Maps With Poetic License Of Places We Know Nothing About!
- In Other Words – To Put It Differently - We Must Be Careful Not To Confuse The Vehicle That Brings Truth With The Actual Message.

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell’s Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure**

Alternative To Forced Choice In Absolute Interpretation Of Ultimate Reality Claims:

- Both Jesus Christ & His Apostles Purposefully Selected Cultural & Specific Regional Imagery Of This Life & The Next – Inaccurate Intertestamental Perspectives Of The Afterlife Were Corrected By The New Testament Preference Of The Term “Gehenna” As A Type For Hell.
- Gehenna Was A Powerful Three-Fold Image – The Smell Of Smoldering Sulfur & Burning Garbage; The Stench Of Human **Decomposition** Of Unclaimed Unwanted Bodies & Those Of The Executed Criminals – The Ancient Association With Idolatrous Human Sacrifice Of Children – It Conveyed Well The Dual Concept Of Self-Judgment & Final Punishment.
- Not Once Did The Inspired Writers Make Association With The Fiery Furnace Of Nebuchadnezzar – Another Familiar & Powerful Regional Concept - Illustrating An Image Of Inferno.

goc

Afterlife Emblematist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell’s Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure**

➤ **In Summation, The Fire Of Hell Is A Symbolic Device To Describe Manifestation Of The Divine Judgment – The Painful Feeling Is A Misery Of Spirit Or An Emotional Discomfort Caused By **Mental Anguish** – Both Being Experiences Of An Elemental Type Non-Corporeal Of Nature – Other Interpretation Is Speculative!**



(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell's Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure

Adherents Of An Afterlife In Extremes Of Either/Or Respond:

- Interpretively, These Are Important Inherent Doctrinal Differences Of Opinion Not Simply Cosmetic & Stylistic Differences Of Approach.
- This View Considers Metaphor As The Medium Not The Message – The Communication Means Usage That Is Not The Message Itself.
- Metaphorical View Emerges Publicly As Theological Apology To The Religion Of Secular Humanism & On Timeline With The Modernist Movement In Society.
- Metaphorical View Is Framed As Rationale & Is Argued Consistent With Positivistic Logic.
- This View Of **Perdition's Profound Pain** - In Its Shifting Extrinsic To Intrinsic - Raises Question About The Accuracy & Inerrancy Of Scripture.

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell's Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure

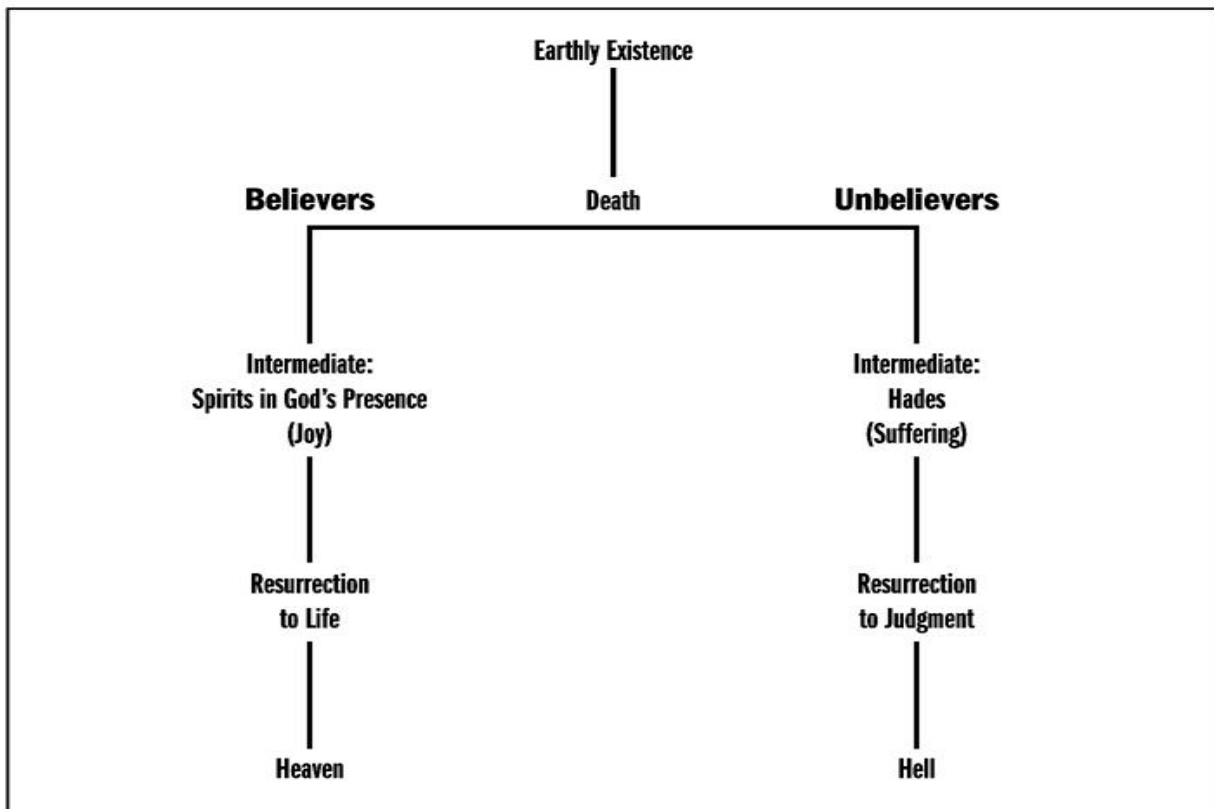
Adherents Of An Afterlife In Extremes Of Either/Or Respond:

- The Metaphorical View Requires Allegorical Reading Of Verses Contextually Intended As Literal – O.T. & N.T. Prophecy Purposed & Expected To Be Explained In Method & Terminology Either Of Physical Or Material Fulfillment.
- The Metaphorical View Requires The Complement Rationale Of Amillennial Eschatology.
- The Metaphorical View Does Not Analogize With Proper Exegesis Regarding The Simple Doctrine Of **Unforgiven Sin** – Its Infinite Character & Consequence.

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Emblematic Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Old Testament & New – Hell’s Eternal Place - Pain & Punishment – Properly Understood As Metaphor and Figure**
 - **Lastly, The Metaphorical View Necessarily Requires The Presumptive & Disrespectful View Of God As Indulgent Parent Who Does Not Mean What He Says**
 - **If Correct – It Remains As A Specious Argument: The Fire’s Symbolic Nature Does Not Soften The Nature Of The Individual’s Punishment In **Everlasting Consciousness** & The Overall Pain Quotient Remains The Same.**
 - **If Correct – The Emblematic Fundamentally Fail To Take The Hell Out Of Hell!**

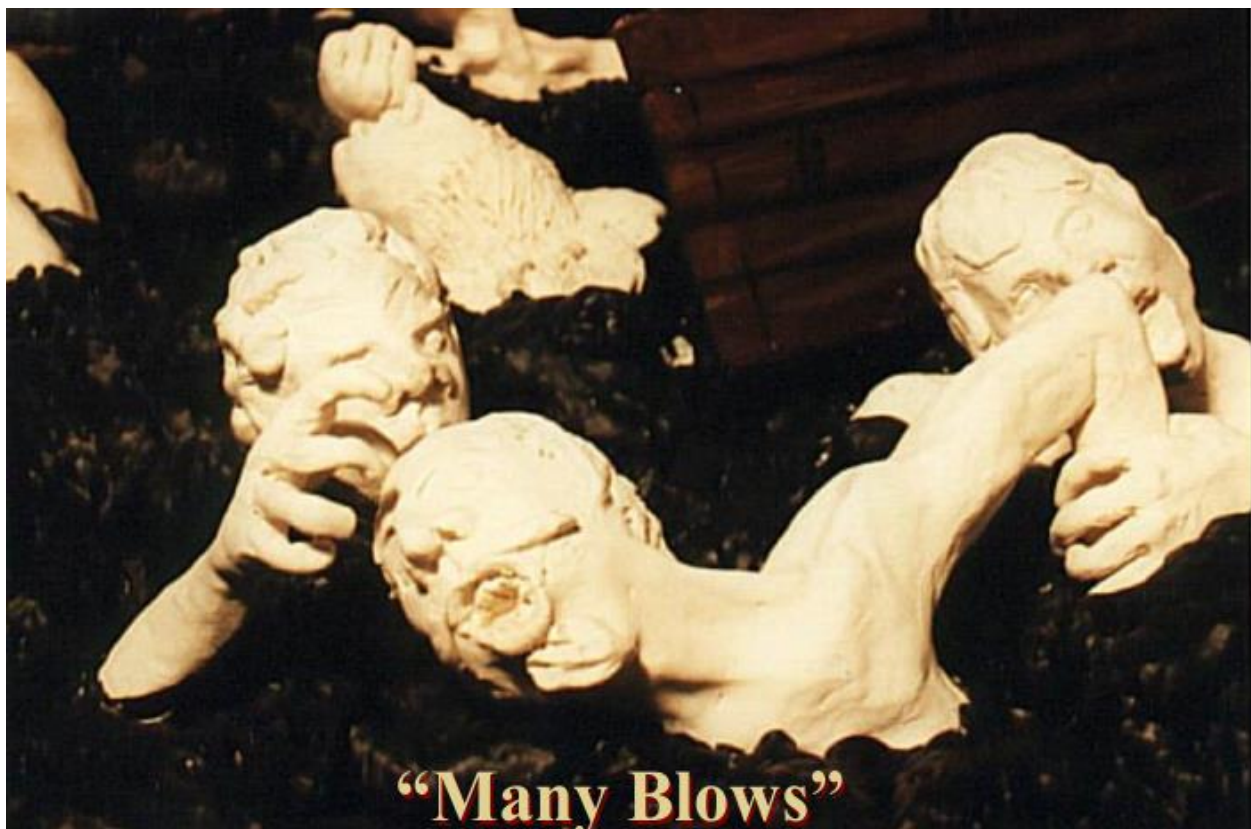


Punishing Violation Of Mores Code

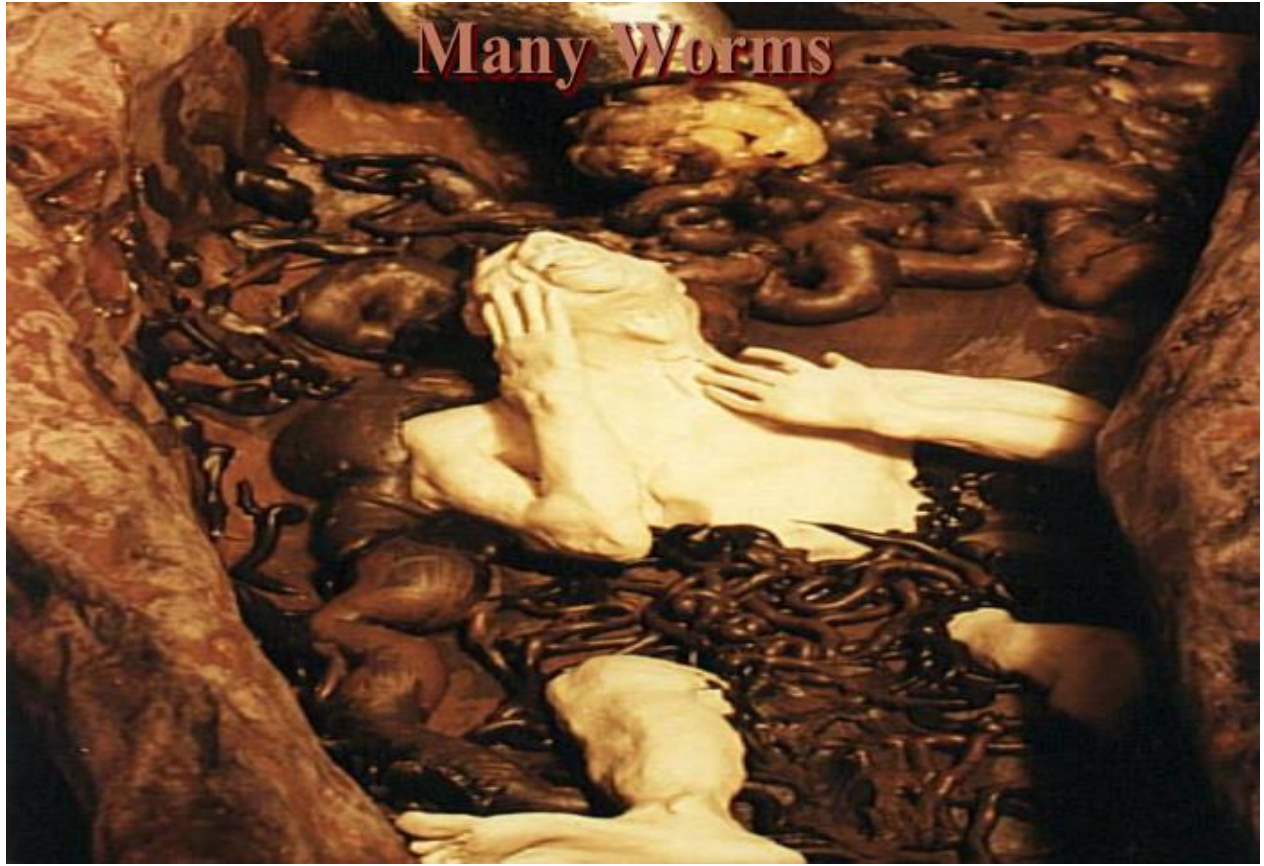
- *Preventive*: This punishment is a penalty exacted to deter others from acting the same in similar situations; This category includes most military court-martial cases.
- *Remedial*: This punishment is a penalty intended to illicit positive & improved performance response. This category includes most cases of workplace discipline.
- *Retributive*: This punishment is a penalty meted because it is definitely deserving. This category includes most cases of courtroom litigation.

EBibleTeacher.com

J-squared



"Many Blows"



Worm Food For The Wasting

Children's Folksong Lyrics:

- The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out. They crawl in thin and they crawl out stout.
- They bury you deep in a deep dark hole. They leave you there to decay and mold.
- The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out. They eat your guts and they spit them out; [chorus]... and then they use them for sauerkraut.
- The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out. The worms play pinochle on your snout.
- Did you ever see a hearse go by and think someday you'll prob'ly die?
- They put you in a little box and cover you up with dirt and rocks.
- The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out. The worms play pinochle on your snout.
- Your guts they turn a slimy green and then they come out like whipping cream!

Worm Food For The Wasting

Mr. Charles Darwin The Oligochaetologist:

- Sightless Spineless Subterranean Population – Of An Approximate 50,000 Per Acre.
- Scientific Notations Evidenced & Recorded Objects Buried By Nightly Earthworming.
- Referenced Nightcrawler Worming Activity Regarding Morbidity & Extinction Activity.
- Related Wormings With Mortal Creature Suffering & Ultimate Human Mortality.

Worm Food For The Wasting

• Myiasis: The Worm-Therapy:

• Confederate Surgeon Joseph Jones:

- “I have frequently seen neglected wounds filled with maggots. As far as my experience extends, these worms only destroy dead tissue & don't specifically injure the well parts.”

• WWI Combat Doctor Notes Review –

- “...the stench of wounds and the swarms of flies [were] quite undescribable... There was no shade – nothing but flies and stretchers... Dr. Baer recorded that two wounded soldiers had been overlooked on the field of battle where they had lain for a week. They had compound fractures and abdominal wounds and all swarmed with maggots... Dr. Baer noticed that the soldiers, far from being in as bad a state as might have been expected from their ordeal, were actually recovering. The maggot-infested wounds had, in fact, begun to heal – to granulate, as the medics would say. Furthermore, there was no indication of sepsis.”

Worm Food For The Wasting

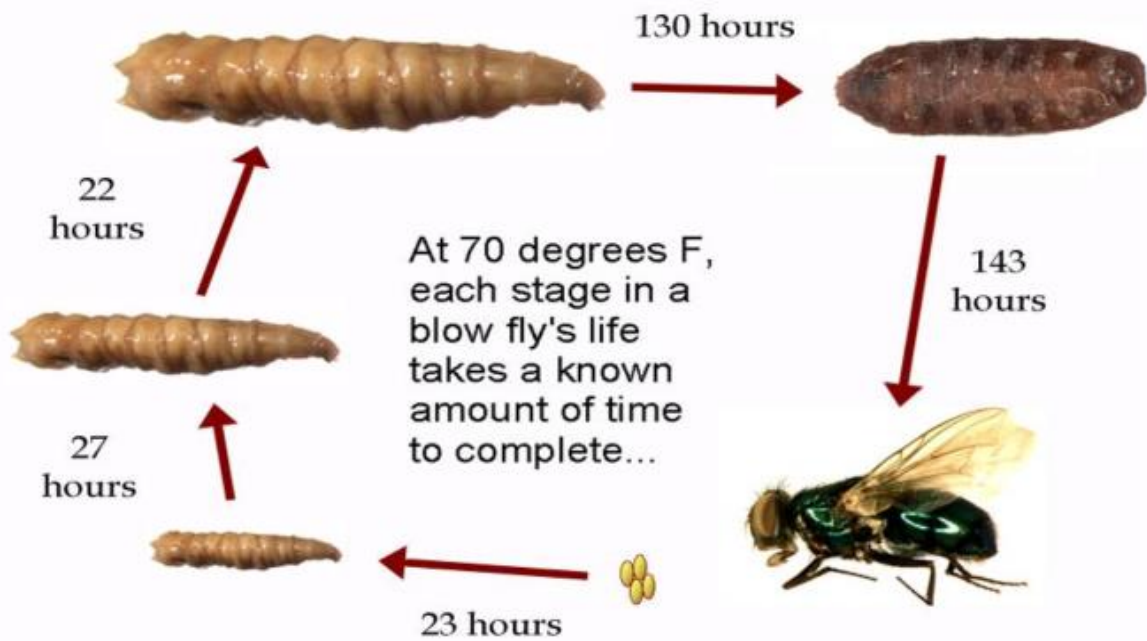
Bible Record As A Deadly Disease:

➤ New English Bible Version Of 10 Plagues

- “ ...The sequence of plagues was, therefore: frogs; *maggots*; flies; and a disease of livestock... Greenburg points out that a mass outbreak of frogs would be followed by the death of these creatures, the accumulated heaps of whose bodies would not dry out quickly (unlike the case of individual frogs), thus providing the ideal breeding ground for flies. Finally, having had a plague of flies, it is perfectly reasonable to expect a murrain to follow.” *From: Erzinclioglu's - Maggots, Murder, & Men*

MAGGOTS

The blow fly life cycle has six parts: the egg, three larval stages, the pupa, and adult.



Worm Food For The Wasting **Bible Record As A Deadly Disease:**

- **The Man Job Said In Chapter 7 - Verse 5**

- “My flesh is clothed with maggots...”

- **Between Testaments In Apocrypha –**
2ND Maccabees - Chapter 9 - Verse 8

- “...carried in an horse-litter showing forth unto all the manifest power of God. (9) So that the worms rose up out of the body of this wicked man, and while he lived in sorrow and pain, his flesh fell away, and the filthiness of his smell was noisome to all in his army. (10) And the man, that thought a little afore he could reach to the stars of heaven, no man could endure to carry for his intolerable stink.”

- **The Acts Of The Apostles Chapter 12**

- “And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten with worms, and gave up the ghost.”

Worm Food For The Wasting **➤ Flavius Josephus Further Writes:**

- “But now Herod’s distemper greatly increased upon him after a severe manner, and this by God’s judgment upon him for his sins: for a fire glowed in him slowly... His entrails were also exulcerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his colon... Nay, further, his privy-member was putrified, and produced worms.”

- **Papias Records Of Judas Iscariot**

- * **Papias Reference States When Judas Fell He Emptied Of Worms!**

Burning Inferno For The Desiccated

• A MEANING MORE THAN METAPHOR!

Burning Inferno For The Desiccated

- *Prescribed Burning:* Full Skin Thickness Wounds Burned By Cauterizing Will Heal Well.
- *Intentional Ignition:* Surface Fires Burning Away Forest Litter Leave Nutrients, Release Germination & Reduce Pathogens.
- *The Fire Triangle & The Life Cycle* - Together In Synergy – Power The Purgation Of Natural Systems.
- *For Example:* Tree Species Have Evolved In Adaptation To Take Advantage Of Forest Fires. Low-level Fires Moving Through The Forest Floor Burning Bottom Branches & Clearing Dead Wood Kick-Start & Turbo Charge Regeneration By Providing Ideal Growing Conditions; In Addition, It Improves The Forest Floor As Habitat For Greater Number Of Species That Thrive In Open Field Rather Than Dense Thicket.
- *Human Error:* Often Upsets This Natural Balance Either Causing Catastrophic Crowning Fires; These Mistakes Usually The Result Of Not Properly Monitoring The Weather; Correction Requires Sacrificial Backburning Of Healthy Timber.
- Question: Is Physical Fire - Friend Or Foe?
- Answer: In This Life It Is A Tool Respected For Its Usage - Right Or Wrong!
- Question: Is The Spiritual Cauldron Of Our Life On Earth – Good Or Bad?
- Answer: While We Live We Can Learn From Error & Events Serve Either End.
- Question: Afterlife Hellfire – Is It Finitely Purifying Or Is It Punitively Endless?
- ANSWER: THIS TOPIC OUR TARGET FOR DELIBERATION & DEBATE!

Outer Darkness: Homer Hailey Highlights

A MEANING MORE THAN METAPHOR!

Outer Darkness: Homer Hailey Highlights

- **Outer darkness is the total darkness, apart from all light.**
- **This concept reflects the emptiness of the pre-creation period – the “darkness on the deep” – the “darkness of nothingness”.**
- **There is physical light and spiritual light; Spiritual light is that which emanates from God – III Corinthians 4: 6; I John 1: 5**
- **Paul’s Doxology of I Timothy 6: 14ff punctuates the “Light Unapproachable”.**
- **From Satan’s sin and fall God prepared “pits of darkness” for all the rebellious angels - III Peter 2: 4.**
- **Before the fall of man – God was the spiritual light in the garden of Eden – communing with the two human beings.**
- **Satan & sin separated the couple from God & darkness of sin settled upon their descendants.**
- **God destroyed the earth except for one family.**
- **Isaiah 42: 6 & 60: 1 – 3 indicate early God’s intention for His chosen people “as a light of the Gentiles.”**
- **God’s Word is referred to as light by the psalmist – verses 105, 130.**

Outer Darkness: Homer Hailey Highlights

- **God's Son** is referred to as the **light of life** – John 1: 4 – 9; 8: 12.
- **Christ's followers** are referred to as: **"light of the world"** – Matthew 5: 14 – 16
- **Jesus warned** of **"outer darkness;"** on those particular occasions when the goodwill overtures of God had been rejected.
- **Avoidance Of Outer Darkness Is Dependent On:**
- **Faithfulness** – Matthew 8: 5 – 13.
- **Preparation** – Matthew 22: 1 – 14.
- **Productivity** – Matthew 25: 14 – 30.
- **Three Hours Of Dark At Crucifixion Enlightens:**
- His death reveals three mysteries; 1) The darkness that engulfed the land ; 2) God's withdrawing His presence from the cross scene and the agonizing cry of Jesus; 3) The saints coming out of their tombs after His resurrection.

Outer Darkness: Homer Hailey Highlights

- In the writings of the O.T. prophets darkness and sin are connected and discussed together.
- **Our Savior** "became a curse for us" – Galatians 3: 13.
- **People rejected** – Hebrew Jews and Gentile Romans - this ultimate sacrifice – God's offer for human redemption - returning it with insults and mockery.
- **The darkness** coming suddenly at a definite hour and being abruptly lifted at a marked time – indicated by cause and effect it was from God.
- **They rejected the messiah** – who had said – such was to reject the sender; In other words, by way of rejecting the Son of God – they had also rejected The Father – Luke 10: 16.
- **Moreover,** rejection of the Messiah as the light of the world was equivalent to rejecting God as the source of spiritual light.
- **Finally,** God removed Himself from the scene and darkness immediately engulfed the total area; For three hours Jesus suffered not only the physical torture of the cross but the personal pain of utter loneliness in total darkness.

Outer Darkness: Homer Hailey Highlights

- Feeling defeat, despair, “abandoned and deserted” both by man and of God - He cried out – “My God, my God, why hast thou ‘forsaken’ me?”
- Then there were convulsions in the natural world and rocks were rent and tombs opened.
- But, the bodies of the saints raised did not come forth and appear to witnesses until after Jesus arose from the dead – Matthew 27: 51 - 53.
- Similarly, at the ending of the universe the elements will be returned to nothingness – III Peter 3: 10 – 13.
- Furthermore, at the passing of finite time there will exist no space or place for the human race – Revelation 20: 11.
- At the perishing of the present heaven & earth the sources of physical light – the sun, the moon, and the stars - will be extinguished!
- The city of the new heaven and earth “hath no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine upon it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the lamp thereof is the Lamb” - Revelation 21: 23.

The Other Side: Will It Have Any Permanent Occupants?

“The positive teaching of Holy Scripture is that sin and sinners will be blotted out of existence. There will be a clean universe again when the great controversy between Christ and Satan is ended.” (W.A. Spicer)

“The fire of hell does not torment, but rather consumes the wicked.” (Clark H. Pinnock)

“It is in mercy to the universe that God will finally destroy the rejectors of His grace.” (Ellen G. White)

“For our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb. 12:29)

A recent Pogo cartoon strip portrayed Pogo and his friends in a baseball game. It was the final game of the regular season, and they were losing 44 to 0 in the first inning. The disappointed catcher made a trip to the pitcher’s mound, handed the ball to Pogo and said, “I guess this means we’re out of the play-offs, huh?” “Out of the playoffs?” Pogo exclaimed, “we’re *metaphysically eliminated!*”

Some evangelicals have embraced the doctrine which teaches that all those who reject Christ will be metaphysically eliminated at God’s judgment. That doctrine is known as *annihilationism*, which teaches that, although everyone will survive death and even be resurrected, the impenitent will finally be destroyed. “Conditional immortality,” a related term, means that no one survives death except those to whom God gives life; that is, man is immortal by grace, not by nature.

The Church of England Doctrine Commission released its official report, *The Mystery of Salvation*, in 1995. It argued that it is “incompatible with the essential Christian affirmation that God is love to say that God brings millions into the world to damn them . . . Hell is not eternal torment, but it is the final and irrevocable choosing of that which is opposed to God so completely and so absolutely that the only end is total non-being.”

In 2000 *The Nature of Hell*, a report of the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals (ACUTE), was published. This document affirmed belief in hell, but insisted that “specific details of hell’s duration, quality, finality, and purpose which are at issue in the current evangelical debate are comparatively less essential.”

One of the driving forces behind the evangelical exodus from the traditional doctrine of hell is that of setting forth a biblical and reasonable theodicy to the world. A “theodicy” is a defense of God’s justice in the face of evil’s reality. One theologian says that “the idea of everlasting torment (especially if it is linked to soteriological predestination) raises the problem of evil to impossible dimensions. If Christians want to hold that God created some people to be tortured in hell forever, then the apologetic task in relation to theodicy is just hopeless.”

This same theologian argues that the problems of Auschwitz and cancer pale in comparison to the problem of God allowing most of His creatures to go ignorantly to hell. The doctrine of annihilation is seen, therefore, as a superior theodicy, for it emphasizes that those who are not saved will not exist forever in a place called hell or the lake of fire, but will either simply pass out of existence or be actively put out of existence by God. A number of prominent contemporary evangelicals advocate annihilationism, perhaps the one who has written the most in its favor being Edward Fudge. His work, *The Fire That Consumes*, provides an almost 500-

page challenge to non-annihilationist Evangelicals. Fudge and Robert Peterson co-authored the book, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue*. Debating the primary issues between annihilationists and non-annihilationists, this text is well worth reading. One of Peterson's more powerful points is made when he challenges Fudge on the issue of the definition of death as cessation of being.

Peterson writes,

Fudge by implication compromises the doctrine of Christ. To hold that Jesus was annihilated when he died means either that his whole person (deity and humanity) was annihilated or that his human nature alone was annihilated. Either conclusion is disastrous. To hold that the person of Christ ceased to exist in death is to explode the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. It is to assert that the second person of the Godhead went out of existence. It is to assert that the resurrection was a recreation of the second person of the Trinity so that henceforth one person of the Trinity is a creature, not the Creator.

Other annihilationists include the late Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, John Wenham, and Stephen Travis, as well as John R.W. Stott and Clark H. Pinnock. We will note some of the statements made by the latter two evangelicals and then respond to their reasons for holding to annihilationism.

John R.W. Stott [1921–]

A highly regarded British Evangelical, John Stott has challenged the Christian community to faithful preaching and steadfast spirituality. Over twenty of his books continue to be published. In one booklet he poignantly argues, "If we come to Scripture with our minds made up, expecting to hear from it only an echo of our own thoughts and never the thunderclap of God's, then indeed he will not speak to us and we shall only be confirmed in our own prejudices."

John Stott engages in a book-length debate with the liberal Anglican David L. Edwards in *Evangelical Essentials*. In that work Stott does a masterful job of faithfully representing evangelical theology, defending the orthodox position on miracles, the deity of Christ, the atonement, and other areas, but departing from the long-held view of the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked.

Stott is put on the spot by Edwards to take a stand either for or against the traditional view of hell. Some have suggested that Stott was baited by Edwards into disclosing his annihilationist view. However, Stott says to Edwards:

I am grateful to you for challenging me to declare my present mind. I do not dogmatise about the position to which I have come, I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among Evangelicals on the basis of Scripture. I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal, conscious torment."

Stott expresses gratitude that he, perhaps after years of holding to annihilationism, could publicly affirm his belief that the wicked will be consumed by the fire of God.

Pleading with evangelicals "to survey afresh the biblical material" on the fate of the wicked, Stott advises that they must open their hearts and minds "to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilation, and that 'eternal conscious torment' is a tradition which has to

yield to the supreme authority of Scripture.” He then presents four lines of argument which we will consider shortly.

Clark H. Pinnock [1937–]

This influential Canadian theologian has challenged the church to defend biblical Christianity and to present the message of the Gospel in a contemporary and relevant manner. Responding to a liberal theologian’s review of his *Scripture Principle*, Pinnock writes: “As an evangelical I believe there is a truth deposit in scripture which needs to be guarded (2 Tim. 1:14).”

However, he charges Christians who still hold to the eternal conscious punishment view of the Other Side with failing to come to grips with “the moral horror and exegetical flimsiness of the traditional view of hell,” challenging the evangelical world with the question: “How can one imagine for a moment that the God who gave his Son to die for sinners because of his great love for them would install a torture chamber somewhere in the new creation in order to subject those who reject him to everlasting pain?”¹⁴

Pinnock sees only three possible options concerning the lost: the traditional doctrine of eternal torment (which he says is “morally and scripturally flawed”), universalism (to which he says “large numbers of sensitive Christians” will turn if the traditional view of hell is not abandoned), and annihilationism (which can be referred to as “fire, then nothing”). The last appears to have the fewest problems to Pinnock. God doesn’t raise the wicked in order to torture them eternally and consciously, but “rather to declare his judgment upon the wicked and to condemn them to extinction, which is the second death (Rev. 20:11–15).”

In a dialogue similar to Stott’s with David Edwards, Pinnock engages in a *Theological Crossfire* with the liberal Delwin Brown. Beginning with an analysis of theological method, Pinnock then discusses with Brown the doctrines of God, sin, Christ, and salvation. The last chapter concerns the Christian hope and there Pinnock defends his annihilationist view of hell.

Pinnock argues that the New Testament writers “surrendered entirely to Hellenism” in their expectation that God would raise up the whole person in body and soul. He questions the traditional doctrine that Christians go immediately to heaven when they die, stating that “this is not really an accurate way of speaking biblically.”¹⁸ He is arguing against what he considers the Greek idea of the existence of man’s eternal soul—an issue which we will discuss shortly.

Concerning the question, What will happen to those who finally reject God’s love? Pinnock writes:

[Evangelicals] have taught that there will be a literal fire in which people will be tortured forever and ever. But surely this is both morally intolerable and fortunately biblically unnecessary ... The belief in hell as everlasting torture is probably based upon the Greek view of the immortality of the soul, which crept into Christian theology and extended the experience of judgment into endless ages.

The traditional doctrine of hell, Pinnock argues, is “a clear example of how moral sense causes us to reopen an exegetical question.” He then drops the gloves and issues the challenge: “It’s time for evangelicals to come out and say that the biblical and morally appropriate doctrine of hell is annihilation, not everlasting torment.”²¹

The liberal Delwin Brown is not convinced that the traditional doctrine of hell as eternal conscious punishment can so easily be abandoned by evangelicals. He asks Pinnock: “Why is belief in hell as eternal punishment not mandatory for evangelicals? Aren’t you playing the game

you attribute to liberals—‘picking and choosing’ what you want to believe?’ Although Pinnock believes that Brown has misunderstood him (“I do not in fact deny hellfire”), Brown echoes the position of Ferré (noted in chapter 2) that the Bible sets forth several views of the fate of the wicked. Brown challenges Pinnock:

Your “reform” of the traditional view of hell is a considerable improvement, in my judgment ... You want in the end to say that what the Bible “really” teaches is the destruction of the wicked, not their everlasting torment. Is it not nearly accurate to say: (a) the Bible contains differing views about what happens to the wicked, (b) there are several more or less plausible ways to construe the biblical message as a whole, and (c) the broad interpretation of the biblical witness that you defend (but not prove) leads you on this particular point to deny conscious everlasting torment and affirm a doctrine of hell as annihilation?

Brown then concludes by saying to Pinnock that “We [liberals] are not picking and choosing anymore than you are. Like you, we find ourselves drawn to the biblical witness and compelled to listen to its manifold voices. Like you, we struggle, amidst the wealth and diversity of these voices, to come to some interpretation of that witness as a whole.”

Brown both disagrees and agrees with Pinnock’s doctrine of annihilation:

According to the alternative and more dominant view in the New Testament, hell represents something that has an everlasting reality. This, of course, is the view that became orthodox. You are properly harsh in your criticism of orthodox talk about hell as a literal place, to say nothing of its heinous conception of hell as a place of everlasting torment.

One respects Pinnock for dialoguing with Brown. However, the real issue is simply this: does the Bible present *one* view of the fate of the wicked? If it does, is annihilationism more consistent with the biblical material, or is the traditional view of eternal conscious punishment?

Our position is that the traditional doctrine of eternal conscious punishment makes more sense with the biblical data. To prove our case, we will follow Stott’s four lines of argument against the traditional view, interacting with Pinnock’s (and others’) statements as well.

Scriptural Language

Annihilationists frequently contend that the terms used in the Bible about the wicked’s fate are terms more of destruction than of enduring punishment. For example, Stott argues that if “to kill” is to deprive the body of life, “hell” would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being.

An Immortal Soul?

Employing a standard argument of annihilationists, Stott emphasizes that man is not naturally immortal. The concept of man’s possessing an immortal soul is a Greek concept, he says, not a biblical one. The Lord “alone is immortal” (1 Tim. 6:16); the gift of immortality is given only to those who respond positively to the Gospel. “Christ ... has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10).

Pinnock agrees and argues that it is the “belief in the natural immortality of the soul which is so widely held by Christians, although stemming more from Plato than the Bible, [which] really

drives the traditional doctrine of hell more than exegesis does.” (One might, of course, remind Pinnock that his rejection of hell is, as he admits, driven more by his “moral revulsion” than by exegetical considerations.)²⁸ Pinnock says that the traditional view argues that if souls will exist forever, those who reject the Gospel must be put *somewhere*: “I am convinced that the hellenistic belief in the immortality of the soul has done more than anything else (specifically more than the Bible) to give credibility to the doctrine of the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked.”

This argument is hardly new. John Calvin, for example, in his *Psychopannychia* attacked the doctrine of “soul-sleep” (the idea that the believer does not go immediately into the presence of the Lord at death, but that his soul “sleeps” in the grave until the Resurrection. Calvin argues from Jesus’ words of comfort to the thief on the cross (“Today, you will be with Me in paradise” Luke 23:43) that the believer is ushered immediately into the presence of Christ at death (cf. Luke 16:22).

Seventy years ago Archbishop William Temple dismissed the traditional doctrine of eternal conscious punishment, making the same point as Pinnock:

One thing we can say with confidence: Everlasting torment is to be ruled out. If men had not imported the Greek and unbiblical notion of the natural indestructibility of the individual soul, and then read the New Testament with that already in their minds, they would have drawn from it [the New Testament] a belief, not in everlasting torment, but in annihilation. It is the fire that is called *aeonian* [everlasting], not the life cast into it.

Misunderstood Orthodoxy

In a two-part article entitled “Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell,” Alan W. Gomes responds to the charge that the orthodox have adopted the Platonic concept of an immortal, indestructible soul. Conservatives have *not* come to believe in the immortality of the soul because of extra-biblical Greek thought, Gomes argues. The accusation that hell is an invented abode for the indestructible souls of wicked people is fallacious.

Gomes argues that the conditionalists have not really understood the orthodox teaching on the soul’s immortality. Orthodox Christians hold that the soul’s immortality is not an absolute but *a contingent immortality*. “The soul, as a created substance, depends on God’s continuing providential support just as all other created entities do.” Gomes makes the point that the soul is immortal “not because it cannot be reduced to nothing by God, but by God’s ordinance in and so far as it is indestructible by second causes. In other words, while the ‘immortal’ soul is impervious to destruction from both external secondary causes (e.g. people), and internal secondary causes (e.g. diseases, such as can afflict the body), the soul could be annihilated by its primary cause, God.” The orthodox do *not* teach the soul’s *absolute* indestructibility.

Murray Harris makes much the same point when he writes that, “as for the question of man’s original state, we may suggest that he was created neither immortal (see Gen. 3:22–24) nor mortal (see Gen. 2:17) but with the potentiality to become either, depending on his obedience or disobedience to God. While not created *with* immortality, he was certainly created *for* immortality. Potentially immortal by nature, man actually becomes immortal through grace.”

Lest annihilationists think they have an ally in Harris, he argues that “conditional immortality” of this variety is quite different from the popular meaning of that expression. That popular meaning is the view that only the righteous will live forever, the unrighteous being consigned to annihilation, either at death or after suffering divine punishment for a period. The Apostle Paul teaches that immortality is conditional in the sense that there is no eternal life apart from Christ.

“This does not imply that existence beyond death is conditional or that unbelievers will be annihilated,” Harris says, because “in New Testament usage, immortality has positive content, being more than mere survival beyond death, its opposite is not nonexistence, but the ‘second death’ (Rev. 20:6, 14) which involves exclusion from God’s presence” (2 Thes. 1:9). He emphasizes that “forfeiture of immortality means the deprivation of eternal blessedness but not the destruction of personal existence. All human beings survive beyond death, but not all will become immortal in the Pauline sense.” In biblical thought, Harris adds, “life is not equated with mere existence and death with nonexistence, for both life and death are modes of existence.”³⁶

He concludes that “neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament entertains the possibility of the total extinction of persons. The New Testament contains sufficient warnings of the dire, eternal consequences of rejecting Christ to leave us in no doubt that the early church rejected both universalism and annihilationism.”

Louis Berkhof, as well, argues that “God is indeed the only one that has inherent immortality. Man’s immortality is derived, but this is not equivalent to saying that he does not possess it in virtue of his creation . . . Eternal life is indeed the gift of God in Jesus Christ, a gift which the wicked do not receive, but this does not mean that they will not continue to exist.” Twentieth-century theologian John Murray says, “Man is not naturally mortal; death is not the debt of nature but the wages of sin.”³⁹

One might grant for argument’s sake that man is not naturally endowed with immortality. Although one suspects that the Greeks are getting the credit (blame?) for the doctrine of man’s immortality in order to do away with the concept of the everlasting punishment of the wicked, the Bible clearly speaks of the existence of the wicked after death. Hebrews 9:27 emphasizes that “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” As well, the “everlasting contempt” of Daniel 12:2 assumes the continuing existence of the objects of God’s hatred (see the discussion of God’s “holy hatred” in chapter 6).

Of course, it is quite common for annihilationists to reject the doctrinal validity of the story of the rich man Dives (from the Latin for “rich man”) and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) (discussed in depth in chapter 5). That is, if that teaching section of Jesus is meant to be understood as authoritative information about the after-death condition of the righteous and the wicked, then annihilationism is *automatically* ruled out as a viable viewpoint for Dives is clearly portrayed, not as destroyed, but as consciously suffering in hell (vv. 23–25, 28). As Reymond argues, “the parable may be describing most immediately the intermediate state, but there is nothing in the parable which suggests that the intermediate state’s ‘torment’ will cease for the lost after their resurrection and judgment.”

Terms of Destruction

Stott denies not only man’s immortal nature, but makes the basic point that eternal perdition is frequently described in Scripture as “destruction.” “It would seem strange,” Stott says, “. . . if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed.”

The most common Hebrew term for “destroy” is *abad*, a word with a wide range of meaning. The people of Chemosh were “destroyed,” but this refers to their being sold into slavery, not their being annihilated (Num. 21:29). Saul’s donkeys were *abad* in 1 Samuel 9:3, 20, but *abad* obviously means “lost,” not annihilated, in this text. A “broken” (*abad*) vessel (Ps. 31:12) is one which is rendered unfit for use, not one that has ceased to exist.

In the New Testament the Greek verb *apolumi* is translated “destroy” and its noun form (*apoleia*) as “destruction.” Stott cites texts such as Matthew 2:13; 12:14; and 27:[20] (which refer to the plots by Herod and, later, the Jews to kill Jesus) as evidence of destruction. He then

employs Matthew 10:28 (“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can *destroy* both soul and body in hell,” emphasis mine) to prove the soul’s total annihilation in hell.

The same term “destroy” (*apolumi*), however, is used in Luke 15 by Jesus of three illustrations of lostness: in verses 1–7 to describe the lost, but existing, sheep; in verses 8–9 to describe the lost, but existing, coin; and in verse 24 to describe the prodigal, but existing, son. Other texts (such as John 11:50; Acts 5:37; 1 Cor. 10:9–10; and Jude 11) also use *apoleia* or *apolusthai* to indicate destruction, but not annihilation. Jesus also refers to Judas Iscariot as “lost” in John 17:12, but annihilation could not have been his point, for Judas had not yet hanged himself.

Although a different term is used, the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:17 that “if anyone *destroys* God’s temple, God *will destroy* him” (my emphasis). One lexicon lists this term (and its use in 1 Cor. 3:17) as “*destroy* in the sense [of] ‘punish with eternal destruction.’” The term suggests ruination, or perhaps, desecration in the context, but certainly not the idea of annihilation.

In our contemporary language we might say “the Boston Red Sox *destroyed* the New York Yankees last night!” Although George Steinbrenner is capable of accomplishing that task without any outside help, we certainly do not mean annihilation by such hyperbole. We sometimes speak of an automobile as *totaled*, not at all meaning that it has ceased to exist. Charles Hodge points out that “To destroy is to ruin. The nature of that ruin depends on the nature of the subject of which it is predicated. A thing is ruined when it is rendered unfit for use; when it is in such a state that it can no longer answer the end for which it was designed.... A soul is utterly and forever destroyed when it is reprobated, alienated from God, rendered a fit companion only for the devil and his angels.”

One of the passages which Stott cites to prove annihilation, 1 Corinthians 1:18, tells us that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.” This participle is in the present tense, which “describes *existing* people who are *presently* perishing. The verb does not suggest that their *future* state will be non-existence.”

The term “death,” as well, does not mean cessation of existence. Paul says, for example, that a widow “who lives for pleasure is *dead* even while she lives” (1 Tim. 5:6, emphasis mine). His point is that such an ungodly woman is not just a widow in life—she is a widow in the work of God; she’s a “carcass of the church” (Matthew Henry). Paul’s emphasis is the waste and *ruination* of her life and ministry, not the cessation of her being.

The wicked are sometimes described in Scripture as those who will be “cut off.” Both Fudge and Pinnock cite passages such as Psalm 37:22, 28, 34 and 38 as proving the annihilation of the wicked. The word which is used in those verses is *carath*, the same word which is used of the Messiah being “cut off” in Daniel 9:26! Certainly *carath* in that Messianic prophecy does not indicate that the Messiah would be annihilated.

Other expressions used by annihilationists equally fail to prove their case. Psalm 104:35 records the psalmist praying “Let the sinners be *consumed* out of the earth, and let the wicked *be no more*” (KJV, emphasis mine). However, the same expressions are used prophetically of Christ in Psalm 69:9 (“zeal for your house *consumes* me,” emphasis mine) and of Enoch in Genesis 5:24 (“Enoch walked with God; then he *was no more*, because God took him away,” emphasis mine). The verbs “burn” or “burn up” used of the wicked in Malachi 4:1–3 and Psalm 97:3 are shown not to mean annihilation by Job 30:30 and Revelation 14:10–11.

Scriptural Imagery

Stott's second line of argument focuses on the picture which Scripture paints of the fate of the wicked. The imagery of hell as "eternal fire" does not primarily emphasize torment, Stott suggests, but destruction. "The main function of fire is not to cause pain," he says, "but to secure destruction, as all the world's incinerators bear witness." Obviously, the main function of fire depends upon the one who sets it. Fire may be used to cook, to provide heat or light, or to be stared at to inspire campfire testimonies!

Although the fire is described as "eternal" (Matt. 18:8; 25:41) and "unquenchable" (Matt. 3:12; cf. Luke 3:17), Stott says it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. "Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed for ever, not tormented for ever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which rises for ever and ever."

Questions about That Fire

The argument that God's fire will *consume* man, however, seems inconsistent with the "unquenchable fire" of Matthew 3:12. The Greek term "unquenchable" (*asbestos*) lies behind our English word "asbestos," which Webster's defines as "mineral supposed to be inextinguishable when set on fire." Raymond asks, "[W]hy [does] John [the Baptist] characterize the fire as 'unquenchable' if every impenitent sinner at the final judgment is instantly consumed by it?"

The same question might be asked about Jesus' warning about *gehenna* in Mark 9. Referring back to Isaiah's prophecy of judgment of the wicked in Isaiah 66:24 (cf. Isa. 51:8), Jesus declares that it is a place where the wicked's "worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). As one writer argues, "Worms are able to live as long as there is food for them to consume. Once their food supply has been consumed, the worms eventually die. But the torments of hell are likened to *undying*, not dying worms. This is because their supply of food—the wicked—never ceases."

One might also ask, if the work of destruction is complete, why should there be any smoke at all (Rev. 14:11; 19:3)? A snuffed-out candle continues to exist, even while smoke trickles forth from the "extinguished" wick. Smoke, especially smoke which rises for ever and ever, seems to imply remaining fuel for that fire. As an *unquenchable* (Mark 9:48), *eternal* (Jude 7) fire, the fire of God's judgment is no ordinary one which dies out once its fuel has been consumed. The smoke of the wicked's torment "rises for ever and ever" (Rev. 14:11), evidence not that the fire has done its work (as Stott suggests), but that it is doing its work through an eternal process of endless combustion. As Gomes argues, "Stott replaces the 'unquenchable' fire of Jesus with the 'quenchable' fire of the annihilationists."

Certainly the idea of remedial or temporary suffering does not come to mind when we think of those two expressions: unquenchable fire and undying worms. If God can use a burning bush to communicate to His chosen person in Exodus 3 without consuming *it*, who is to say that His fire of judgment cannot punish those who refuse to believe the Gospel without consuming *them*? (cf. Dan. 3:19–27).

Granted that figurative expressions have limits and that much of the language used to describe the fate of the wicked appears to be symbolic; however, as one writer argues, "the realities [which the New Testament descriptions] seek to represent should surely be understood by us to be *more*—not less—horrible than the word pictures they depict." C.S. Lewis also emphasizes that "the prevalent image of fire is significant because it combines the ideas of torment and destruction. Now it is quite certain that all these expressions are intended to suggest

something unspeakably horrible, and any interpretation which does not face that fact is, I am afraid, out of court from the beginning.”

Scriptural Justice

Stott and Pinnock argue that the traditional view of eternal punishment seems incompatible with God’s justice. That is, sins consciously committed in time do not seem to merit conscious torment throughout eternity. Pinnock minces no words in declaring: “I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity.” To inflict infinite suffering upon those who have committed finite sins, as Pinnock argues,

would go far beyond an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. There would be a serious disproportion between sins committed in time and the suffering experienced forever. The fact that sin has been committed against an infinite God does not make the sin infinite. The chief point is that eternal torment serves no purpose and exhibits a vindictiveness out of keeping with the love of God revealed in the gospel.

However, the argument that infinite punishment for finite sin is unjust rules out not only the traditional view of hell, but also the suggested alternative view of annihilation. “On this ground,” as one writer argues, “God could not even annihilate the sinner for his sin since annihilation is certainly eternal in its effect.”

The argument that finite sins cannot be worthy of eternal suffering is fallacious for two reasons: First, such a position “assumes that the heinousness of a crime is directly related to the time it takes to commit it. But such a connection is nonexistent. Some crimes, such as murder, may take only a moment to commit, whereas it may take a thief hours to load up a moving van with someone’s possessions. Yet, murder is a far more serious crime than theft.”

Second, one must take into account not only the nature of the sin, but also the *person* against whom the sin is committed. Stealing is a crime, but stealing from one’s mother is even more serious because one owes greater respect to one’s parents. “Torturing an animal is a crime, but torturing a human being is an even greater crime, worthy of greater punishment.” (One might suggest that this distinction is fast disappearing in North America, where it is considered a serious crime to kill a whale, but an even more objectionable offense to prevent the abortion of a human being.)

If one takes into account the nature of sin as well as the person against whom the sin is committed, one might ask:

How much more serious, then, is even the slightest offense against an absolutely holy God, who is worthy of our complete and perpetual allegiance? Indeed, sin against an absolutely holy God is absolutely serious. For this reason, the unredeemed suffer absolute, unending alienation from God; this alienation is the essence of hell. It is the annihilationist’s theory that is morally flawed. Their God is not truly holy, for he does not demand that sin receive its due.

Dr. Daniel Fuller makes the same point from a different perspective in his book *The Unity of the Bible*. Arguing from the doctrine of God’s glory, Fuller states that “if God uses his great power to work all things together for the good of those who delight in him, then he must direct the full force of that power against people going in the opposite direction.” That is, “God could not be

loving to those who seek him if he did not vent the power of his wrath against those who remain impenitent. Far from being irreconcilable opposites, God's love and wrath are simply two ways in which he makes it clear that he himself fully honors his name."⁶²

A credible, benevolent government matches the *severity of punishment* to the *enormity of the crime*, Fuller argues. Parking in a "no parking zone" merits a fine, but not a prison term. To give a "slap on the wrist" for rape or murder is a mockery of justice. The point is "if ... humanity has sinned in the worst possible way against God, then our sense of justice must call for the severest punishment, and the biblical teaching of eternal misery in hell for the impenitent meets that requirement." Rather than compromising God's goodness, this view simply says that "for God to be consistent with his burning desire to be fully benevolent to people, he must punish this *enormity* [of unbelief] with the greatest *severity*. Thus the biblical teaching of eternal torment in hell for rejecting God's mercy should accord fully with our sense of justice." We need the reminder that "God can remain loving *only* by opposing, with the full fervency of his love for his own glory, those who oppose him by scorning the opportunity he gives to enjoy that glory." God finds no pleasure in punishing the wicked, but He "nevertheless does it as something he must do, so that without devaluing his glory he can fully rejoice in being merciful to the penitent."⁶⁶

Carson makes an important point concerning the issue of infinite punishment for finite sins. He writes,

One might reasonably wonder why, if people pay for their sins in hell before they are annihilated, they cannot be released into heaven, turning hell into purgatory.

Alternatively, if the sins have not yet been paid for, why should they be annihilated? The truth of the matter is that annihilation does not account for what Jesus calls "an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29), i.e. for sin that "will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matt. 12:32).

Shakespeare's Hamlet, toying with the possibility of killing himself with a dagger, gives us that famous soliloquy:

To be, or not to be—that is the question ... To die—to sleep—No more ... 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd.

Wanting to be free from the guilt of his misdeeds, Hamlet considers suicide. His uncertainty, however, is that he could not be guaranteed release from punishment in the hereafter. Shakespeare reflects the sentiment that annihilation would be a welcomed prospect. Fuller comments on this idea in Shakespeare by saying, "In fact, people hardened in wickedness could take real comfort in the thought that they would simply cease to exist at death rather than having to answer to God for their sins." As Peterson argues, "annihilation is relief from punishment; the damned in hell would love to be annihilated, for this would deliver them out of their terrible suffering."⁶⁹ Ajith Fernando makes the point that "annihilation is very similar to what orthodox Buddhists view as salvation"!

Because there are no small sins against a great God, sin involves infinite demerit. David's confession of his sin against Bathsheba (and her courageous husband Uriah) emphasizes that the eternal God must deal with sin: "Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge." (Ps. 51:4) Jonathan Edwards was right when he said that the reason we find hell so offensive is because of our insensitivity to sin. Fuller criticizes Pinnock's objection to hell as eternal conscious punishment by saying that:

[Pinnock] does not probe deeply enough into the reason why God sent his Son to die for sinners. He certainly did it because he loved them, but why did this love mean that his Son and to die for them? The scriptural answer is that Christ came to die “as the one who would turn aside [God’s] wrath” (Rom. 3:25 margin). Jesus had to appease God’s anger so that God would remain just when he forgave sinners and in no wise tarnish his own glory [Rom. 3:26].

To the common question of annihilationists “What purpose does eternal conscious punishment serve in God’s justice if it is not remedial?” we would respond, it declares His justice!

Referring to Jonathan Edwards’ sermon entitled “The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous: or the Torments of the Wicked in Hell, No Occasion of Grief to the Saints in Heaven,” Fuller points out that it was based on Revelation 18:20 (where God commands the saints to rejoice over Babylon’s judgment). Edwards states:

[I]t will be from exceedingly different principles, and for quite other reasons, that the just damnation of the wicked will be an occasion of rejoicing to the saints in glory ... It will be no argument of want of a spirit of love in them, that they do not love the damned; for the heavenly inhabitants will know that it is not fit that they should love them, because they will know then, that God has no love to them, nor pity for them ... [The suffering of the wicked] will be an occasion of their rejoicing, as the glory of God will appear in it ... God glorifies himself in the eternal damnation of the ungodly men.

Scriptural Universalism

Stott is no universalist, but argues that the Scripture seems to indicate a final reconciliation of all creation to God. Therefore, he says, “the eternal existence of the impenitent in hell would be hard to reconcile with the promises of God’s final victory over evil.” The apparently universalistic texts are easier to relate to the awful realities of hell if hell means destruction, Stott suggests, rather than if it means eternal conscious punishment.

Any Existing Exceptions?

Although Stott makes it clear that texts such as Colossians 1:20 and Philippians 2:10–11 do not lead him to universalism, they underscore (in his mind) the logic of annihilationism’s teaching that the wicked will be put out of existence. Stott asks, “[H]ow [can God] in any meaningful sense be called ‘everything to everybody’ while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment?” “It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more.”⁷⁵

One must respond by pointing out that in Stott’s view “the awful reality of hell” is not an *everlasting one* (presumably hell ceases to exist once it has done its job of annihilating the wicked). Yet Scripture indicates that hell (more technically, the lake of fire) is *eternal* (Rev. 14:11; 19:3; 20:10) and its fire is described as *eternal* (Dan. 12:2; Jude 6–7; 2 Thes. 1:9; Matt. 18:8; 25:41, 46).

Further, the term “everybody” need not involve all existing beings to be considered sufficiently inclusive. For example, one might have a birthday party and state after the celebration: “Everybody had a great time!” The context of that remark makes it clear that its

reference is only to those who were invited and who came. That statement is obviously not implying that those who did not come to the party ceased to exist.

Unhappy Universalists

The universalist, of course, will not be more enamored with the idea of the annihilation of the wicked than with the traditional view of hell. Barclay, for example, clearly identified himself as a universalist. He wrote, “But in one thing I would go beyond strict orthodoxy—I am a convinced universalist. I believe that in the end all men will be gathered into the love of God.” He argues that it is impossible to set limits on God’s grace. He suggests that the operation of God’s grace is not confined to this world and believes that God’s grace will ultimately win every single person. “It is a question of God using an eternity of persuasion and appeal until the hardest heart breaks down and the most stubborn sinner repents.”⁷⁷

No person has the power to defeat the love of God. Barclay states:

There is only one way in which we can think of the triumph of God. If God was no more than a King, or Judge, then it would be possible to speak of his triumph, if his enemies were agonizing in hell or were totally and completely obliterated and wiped out. But God is not only King and Judge, God is *Father*—he is indeed Father more than anything else. No father could be happy while there were members of his family forever in agony. No father would count it a triumph to obliterate the disobedient members of his family. The only triumph a father can know is to have all his family back home.

As we shall see in chapter 4, God has set limits on His grace and the hope of postmortem opportunities for redemption has no scriptural support. As Daniel Fuller states, “Death marks that time when God’s patience with evil people ends.” The British jurist Fitzjames Stephen aptly remarked that “though Christianity expresses the tender and charitable sentiments with passionate ardour, it has also a terrible side. Christian Love is only for a time and on condition; it stops short at the gates of Hell, and Hell is an essential part of the whole Christian scheme.” Barclay also assumes the universal Fatherhood of God, a tenet of universalism which Jesus Himself clearly taught was false (e.g. John 8:44; cf. Eph. 2:3, KJV).

Such apparently universalistic texts as Colossians 1:20 and Philippians 2:10–11 certainly are contradicted in the universalist’s mind if even *one* human being is put out of existence. In one sense, annihilationism seems a variation of universalism in that, of all those who continue to exist forever, there will be only *one* class remaining: the redeemed.

The apparently universalistic texts of Colossians 1 and Philippians 2 were treated in chapter 2. The Scriptures clearly indicate the everlasting existence and confinement of the wicked under judgment. To acknowledge the continuing existence of a class of human beings who rejected the atoning work of Christ does not compromise either God’s holiness or the new heavens and the new earth.

Victory over an enemy may take a variety of forms, despite Barclay’s insistence that “there is only one way in which we can think of the triumph of God.” A capital criminal might be sentenced to life at hard labor. To be victorious, God does not need to annihilate His enemies; He need only demonstrate His righteous judgment through and upon them. J.I. Packer rightly argues that “the holy God of the Bible is praised no less for establishing righteousness by retributively punishing wrongdoers (Rev. 19:1–5) than for the triumphs of his grace (Rev. 19:6–10) [and] it cannot be said of God that expressing his holiness in deserved retribution mars his joy.”

Stott concludes his defense of annihilationism with the words: “I ... believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded

alternative to their eternal conscious torment.” However, one is reminded of the comment written by a university English professor on a student’s essay: “Your paper is both good and original. Unfortunately, what was good was not original and what was original was not very good.” The annihilationists’ arguments for their position are not new, original, or persuasive.

In the final analysis, the issue is not what we finite human beings are able to conceive, imagine, or even tolerate concerning the fate of the wicked. There is only one legitimate question: “What does the Bible teach?” Although we will anticipate some of our later discussion (Chapter 5: “The Other Side According to Jesus”), we want to pose two questions to those who are annihilationists.

How Long Is “Eternal”?

Evangelical annihilationists are up against the ropes when it comes to the biblical language describing the fate of the wicked. They will affirm (as does Stott) that “forever and ever” means “everlasting” in Revelation 14:11, but that it applies only to the smoke of God’s fire which has consumed the wicked (not to their eternal conscious punishment). Apparently in that text “forever and ever” means “forever and ever.” Rene Pache says that the word “eternal” is used sixty-four times to refer to “the divine and blessed realities of the other world ... In all these cases, it is beyond all doubt a question of duration without end.”

However, when Matthew 25 is discussed, a different approach is taken by annihilationists.

Two Flocks

Jesus speaks there of the judgment of the sheep and goats, pointing out that those who had demonstrated their salvation through their works will be commended by Christ and invited into the “kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (v. 34). Those whose faith produced no corresponding works Jesus will describe as “cursed” and He will tell them “depart from Me ... into the *eternal* fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41, emphasis mine). Jesus’ own words conclude this parable, somber words which declare that “[the goats] will go away to *eternal* punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (v. 46, emphasis mine).

Pinnock honestly admits that “the interpretation of everlasting, conscious torment can be read out of [verse 46] if one wishes to do so.” He acknowledges that scholars such as Murray Harris and Robert Gundry read verse 46 in that way, and quotes the latter’s comment that “the parallel between eternal punishment and eternal life forestalls any weakening of the former.”

Pinnock goes on to argue, however, that Jesus does not define the nature of the eternal life or the eternal punishment in Matthew 25: “He just says there will be two destinies and leaves it there. One is free to interpret it to mean either everlasting conscious torment or irreversible destruction.”

Jesus Our Interpreter

But we must respond that Jesus does not just leave it there. Within this same context of Matthew 25, Jesus declares that the righteous will enter the blessedness of the kingdom prepared for them since the creation of the world (v. 34). The wicked’s fate Jesus describes as “eternal punishment” (v. 46) in the place “prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41). As we shall see later, that place is not left undefined in the Bible. Jesus clearly describes the nature of the wicked’s fate throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus does *not* allow for *either* the annihilationist *or* the eternal conscious punishment view in Matthew 25. The place to which the “goats” will be sent will be the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41). Granted, Jesus does not

detail what that eternal fire will involve in Matthew 25, but He has spoken a number of times about the nature of hell up to this point in Matthew's Gospel, and His teaching supplies the basis for the traditional view of eternal conscious punishment. If the Bible, however, clearly declared that the fate of the devil and his angels would be annihilation, then that would, of course, be His meaning in Matthew 25:41. However, such is *not* the case.

How can one deny that the "place" which has been prepared for the "devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41) is not the same "place"—("the lake of burning sulfur")—into which he will be thrown at the judgment (Rev. 20:10)? Those human beings whose names are not found in the Book of Life (Rev. 20:15) will be, as far as we can discern, the same ones (described as "goats") that Jesus will reject and send "into the eternal fire" (Matt. 25:41). That "place" will be a place of unceasing torment (Rev. 20:10). If it is just for God to eternally torment the devil and his angels, why would it not be just for the wicked who merit His wrath to experience the same fate?

After dismissing the story of the rich man's "torments" in Luke 16:19–31 as "Jewish imagery," and arguing that that text is referring only to the intermediate state, Pinnock expresses a basic agnosticism about the fate of the wicked: "I would not say that either side wins the argument hands down largely because the Bible does not seem concerned to deal with this question as precisely as we want it to." If Pinnock is correct, then his own attacks on the traditionalist view should be greatly tempered (such as when he describes the traditional view as "morally and exegetically flawed").

If the argument is "up for grabs," then how can Pinnock declare that the traditionalist "position is in fact very weakly established biblically"? Although he writes that "whether the wicked perish or suffer endlessly, hell is a very grim prospect, and I and the others are not trying to lessen it,"⁸⁷ we believe that is indeed what is happening with the evangelical "annihilation" of hell.

A few words must be said about the charge that traditionalists "smuggle" the term *conscious* into the doctrine of the wicked's punishment. Adjectives begin to multiply when those who seem not to accept biblical teaching use the same terminology to deny that teaching. We agree with Gomes who states that "once we have said the word 'punishment' we have also said, at least by implication, the word 'conscious.' Punishment, per se, is conscious or it is not punishment. A punishment that is not felt is not a punishment." He continues, "Someone cannot be punished eternally unless that someone is there to receive the punishment. One can exist and not be punished, but one cannot be punished and not exist. Nonentities cannot receive punishment."⁸⁹

The expression "eternal punishment" in Matthew 25:46 rules out the possibility that the wicked are annihilated. William Shedd rightly argues that:

the extinction of consciousness is not of the nature of punishment. The essence of punishment is suffering, and suffering is consciousness. In order to be punished, the person must be conscious of a certain pain, must feel that he deserves it, and know that it is inflicted because he does. All three of these elements are required in a case of punishment. To reduce a man to unconsciousness would make his punishment an impossibility. If God by a positive act extinguishes, at death, the remorse of a hardened villain, by extinguishing his self-consciousness, it is a strange use of language to denominate this a punishment.

Eternal Opposites

Stott actually hurts the annihilationist cause by his declaration that "the more unlike ... [heaven and hell] are, the better." Does it not make sense that if heaven represents inexpressible joy, then

hell should be indescribable (not nonexistent) sorrow? “Yet,” as one critic points out, “the whole point of the annihilationist’s argument is to mitigate the horror of eternal suffering for the lost, not to increase it.”⁹²

As much as annihilationists would like Matthew 25:46 to say that it is the *punishment* that is eternal, not the *punishing*, “the Bible uses the adjective ‘eternal’ to describe the *punishment itself*, not merely the result of the punishment.” The adjective *aionion*, although it can at times refer to an “age” or period of time, seems most likely to mean “unending” or “everlasting” here in Matthew 25:46 for a simple reason: *aionion* is used to describe both the length of punishment of the wicked and the length of eternal life for the redeemed. “One cannot limit the duration of punishment for the wicked without at the same time limiting the duration of eternal life for the redeemed.” John Broadus’ commentary on Matthew clearly declares: “It will at once be granted, by any unprejudiced and docile mind, that the punishment of the wicked will last as long as the life of the righteous; it is to the last degree improbable that the Great Teacher would have used an expression so inevitably suggesting a great doctrine he did not mean to teach.”⁹⁵

Who Cares About the Devil?

A Scottish proverb states that “the devil is a busy bishop in his own diocese.” Some who deny his diocese begin to doubt the reality of the bishop. One is not surprised that some who distance themselves from the biblical doctrine of hell eventually question the personality and reality of Satan. But the Bible sets forth with equal clarity both Satan’s reality *and* his destiny. Unless one is prepared to deny Satan’s real, personal existence, it is clear that those who reject Christ will share Satan’s fate.

Revelation’s Wrath

The Book of Revelation teaches much concerning God’s judgment of the wicked. Referring to human beings who “worship the beast and ... receive his mark”, God tells us in Revelation 14 that such a person will “drink of the wine of God’s fury [and] ... he will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name” (vv. 9–11).

We then read of the seven bowls of God’s wrath being poured out on human beings in Revelation 16. Verses 8–9 of that chapter describe the fourth bowl which, when poured out, gives the sun power to scorch people (*anthropoi*) with fire. Those people are then described as “seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him” (v. 9). Contrary to the common idea that the wicked will experience remorse when they feel God’s judgment, these individuals intensify their blasphemous unbelief and impenitence.

Revelation 20 declares that the devil, who deceived the nations, “was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” (v. 10) There is no exegetical basis whatsoever in this text for suggesting that the devil, if he is indeed a personal being, will be put out of existence at the end of time.

God’s Books

This passage goes on to declare that at the Great White Throne of judgment two sets of books will be opened. One set contains the record of all the works which the dead have done (20:12).

Apparently, God will take the time to show those who rejected Christ that they neither measured up to His holiness, nor to their own moral standards.

The second set of books is described as “the book of life,” referred to again in verse 15 of this chapter, as well as in Revelation 3:5 and 21:27 (cf. Luke 10:20; Dan. 12:1–2). Revelation 20:14 defines the “second death” as the being cast into the lake of fire (not annihilation, as some suggest), which is the fate of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet described four verses earlier (v. 10).

Would one not at this point have to concede, that if this passage (Rev. 20) goes on to state that wicked human beings will be cast into the same place as that unholy trinity, then the fate of those wicked human beings *cannot* be annihilation? This is in fact what Scripture teaches. Revelation 20:15 declares that “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Can there be any doubt that the fate of the wicked, predicted by the Lamb of God Himself in Matthew 25:41, is not reiterated here in Revelation 20:10–15?

Pinnock is in error when he interprets Revelation 20:10 as saying that “John’s point seems to be that everything which has rebelled against God will come to an absolute end.” That, as Gomes says, may be Pinnock’s point, but “John’s point is that the Devil, the beast, and false prophet will be tormented day and night, forever and ever. To read the text is to refute Pinnock.”⁹⁸ Incidentally, Revelation 20:10’s expression “for ever and ever” (also used of the wicked in Revelation 14:11) is designed to emphasize the concept of eternity. R.C.H. Lenski points out that:

the strongest expression for our “forever” is *eis tous aiōnan tôn aiōnōn*, “for the eons of eons”; many aeons, each of vast duration, are multiplied by many more, which we imitate by “forever and ever.” Human language is able to use only temporal terms to express what is altogether beyond time and timeless. The Greek takes its greatest term for time, the eon, pluralizes this, and then multiplies it by its own plural, even using articles which make these eons the definite ones.

This same phrase is the strongest form in which the idea of eternity is conveyed in the Bible, and is used several times to refer to the duration of God’s own existence (Rev. 1:18; 4:9–10; 10:6; 15:7).

Identical Fates

Pinnock is correct when he declares that “the Devil, the beast, and the false prophet ... cannot be equated with ordinary human beings, however we should understand their nature.” Gomes responds: “Of course an angel’s nature is different than a human being’s nature. But the point of ‘equivalence’ is not the *nature* of the beings (i.e. angels as disembodied spirits vs. human beings as psycho-physical unities), but their ultimate *fate*.” Texts such as Matthew 25:41; Revelation 14:11; 19:20; and here (Rev. 20:15) declare that their fates will be identical. Isaac Watts was not biblically incorrect when he penned these words:

There is a dreadful Hell,
And everlasting pains;
There sinners must with devils dwell
In darkness, fire, and chains.

One must also point out that the eternal conscious punishment of the devil and his angels disproves Pinnock’s point concerning the unjustness of infinite judgment for finite sin. That is,

the devil and the demons are not eternal beings, yet their eternal fate is eternal punishment (Rev. 20:10) for finite rebellion.

Unless annihilationists like Stott and Pinnock are prepared to declare that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet are abstract symbols, or insist that one cannot derive doctrine from the symbolic Book of Revelation or from Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25, we hope they will reconsider their rejection of the traditional view.

Demonic Expectation

There are several other deficiencies in the annihilationist position. For example, even though Satan is a "liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44), he and his minions sometimes (perhaps by force) speak the truth. One such occasion concerns the healing of two demon-possessed men in Matthew 8. When Jesus approached them, the demons cried out, "What do you want with us, Son of God? Have you come here to *torture* us before the appointed time?" (v. 29, emphasis mine) The same Greek verb *basanitzô* is used here as is used in Revelation 14:10 and 18:7–8 (see discussion in chapter 6). The parallel account in Luke 8 records the demon speaking through one of the men saying, "I beg you, don't *torture* me!" (v. 28, emphasis mine) Mark's version of the same incident describes the man as shouting at the top of his voice and crying out "Swear to God that you won't *torture* me!" (5:7, emphasis mine)

Of course, annihilationists might suggest that the demons want to deceive us into believing that God is a tormenting fiend, but these accounts seem patently genuine, reflecting terror on the part of these satanic spirits. Perhaps they know their certain fate and thought Jesus was jumping the eschatological timetable. At any rate, their expectation was punishment, not annihilation.

Degrees of Punishment

A few years ago I learned first-hand the meaning of the expression "Achilles heel." My Achilles tendon ruptured when I was playing basketball, requiring surgery and an extended period on crutches. The "Achilles heel" of a position is that point at which it seems especially vulnerable. Annihilationism's Achilles heel appears to be the issue of *degrees of punishment*.

Jesus rebukes the cities of Korazin and Bethsaida for their unbelief in Matthew 11:20–24 (parallel: Luke 10:13–16), indicating that more severe judgment will be given to those who have received greater opportunity for belief. Jesus declares that "it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town" (Matt. 10:15) which does not receive the disciples' witness.

Luke 12:47–48 teaches the same truth of degrees of punishment at the judgment. However, the doctrine of annihilation posits a final, undifferentiated nonexistence for all the wicked. Those who hold this view might grant that a temporary punishment of hellfire, its duration commensurate with the wicked person's just desserts, will occur, yet the final result is the same for every member of that class: they are all, equally, no more. Grounds points out that "instead of absolute equality, Scripture indicates an infinite *inequality* in punishment. There will be the 'few stripes' and the 'many stripes.' "

We are not surprised to hear Fudge's response to Matthew 11:22–24 that "Jesus here indicates that there will be degrees of punishment at the end, based on degrees of culpability ... [But] Jesus here personifies cities, however, and we do not wish to make too much of these words in our study of the final punishment of individual sinners."

An Invitation to Return

Finally, Pinnock acknowledged earlier his commitment to guard the "truth deposit in Scripture" (cf. 2 Tim. 1:14). If the biblical data supports the traditional view of hell, is it too harsh to

suggest that he has made a “withdrawal” from that truth deposit by denying the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment? His “thought experiment,” the advocating of annihilationism, and his attack on evangelicals who proclaim a “pseudo-gospel”¹⁰⁶ (including the eternal conscious punishment view) are cause for concern. Although he considers the annihilation of the wicked “a grim prospect,” we would suggest that he reconsider his doctrinal change.

The “pilgrimage” of Clark Pinnock, chronicled by Barry L. Callen in his *Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal: An Intellectual Biography*, causes some to rejoice and others to weep. Callen says that “his [Pinnock’s] current faith hypotheses are well-tested and worthy.” What are some of his “current faith hypotheses”? Apart from calling into question the truthfulness of Scripture (*The Scripture Principle*), Pinnock postulates a variety of on-the-edge (if not outside the pale of Evangelicalism) theories which cause many to question his theological orthodoxy.

With his pivotal work, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century*, Pinnock reiterates his orientation to see God as love, rather than as an authoritarian and austere judge. Along with his *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness*, it appears that Pinnock’s theological momentum might move him into some form of universalism. One wonders what factors have kept him from becoming a “wishful universalist,” for he has seriously submitted a wide variety of options to avoid the tragic truth of an everlasting hell (annihilationism, postmortem conversionism, salvific general revelation, a wider hope view, and open theism).

In endorsing Callen’s work on Pinnock, Stan Grenz says that “... no story of evangelical theology in the twentieth century is complete without the inclusion of his fascinating intellectual journey from quintessential evangelical apologist to anti-Augustinian theological reformist.” I recall back in the 1970’s one Evangelical debater being so sharp with his unbelieving antagonists that the audience of Christians was reported as rooting *against him* in the debate! Along came Pinnock and in his public debates with people like Madeline Murray O’Hare he was marked by a gentle and persuasive and winsome approach. In the last few years the gloves have come off and Pinnock has caustically attacked fellow Evangelicals on a number of fundamental issues. I believe a strong case could be made that Pinnock’s hypotheses have, indeed, been well-tested (throughout church history) and have been found wanting.

John Stott’s sensitive recommendation of annihilationism as a viable biblical alternative certainly merits our respect, even if we believe his position is a wrong one. We are reminded of a statement in his pamphlet *Our Guilty Silence*. There he tells about the seventeenth century Jesuits in China who, in order not to upset the social sensitivities of the Chinese, excluded the crucifixion and certain other details from the Gospel. Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, Stott says, responded by writing: “We do not learn that they made many lasting converts by the unobjectionable residue of the story.” The redefining of hell along annihilationist lines, we believe, should be reconsidered by Stott.

For those who move in this theological direction of denying the biblical doctrine of hell (and perhaps even further), we believe Walter Brueggemann’s warning is not too harsh and should be carefully heeded: “The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat ... It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane.”⁵

⁵ Dixon, L. (2003). [*The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary challenges to Jesus’ Teaching on Hell*](#) (pp. 85–118). Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.

Part_Four

The Other Side: Will It Have Any Redeemable Occupants?

“Those who assert the possibility of a future chance do not make death the decisive barrier of time for people to make a decision of faith.” (John E. Sanders)

“Some interpreters [hold] that death is the occasion when the unevangelized have an opportunity to make a decision about Jesus Christ.” (Clark H. Pinnock)

“We do not wish to build fences around God’s grace ... and we do not preclude the possibility that some in hell might finally be translated into heaven.” (Donald Bloesch)

“For Christ ... also ... went and preached to the spirits in prison.” (1 Peter 3:18–19)

In the film *Flatliners*, a group of young medical students experiment with death. Through medical technology they take turns rendering each other clinically dead, the others bringing back to life each student who had volunteered for the “journey.” A rather tense competition soon develops to determine who can stay dead longer than the rest and still be successfully resuscitated.

Although those who experience that induced “death” state differ in their religious beliefs about the afterlife, a common theme characterizes their journeys: the consequences of one’s earthly actions follow one into the next world. After returning to life, some of the students make amends with those they had wronged in this world.

Strong theological and medical objections might be raised about this movie’s plot, but *Flatliners* sets forth death as an opportunity to realize some of one’s mistakes in life and to repent. Could it be that Hollywood is, for once, right? That is, some theologians argue today that perhaps God will use death to offer the Gospel to the billions who have never heard in order that they may repent. This view (sometimes referred to as *postmortem* conversion) appears to be a possible answer to the thorny problem of the countless numbers of men and women made in the image of God, who through no fault of their own, never receive the Good News about Christ.

If one affirms the truth of Romans 10:14 (“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?” NKJV), is it not logical that those who have never heard in this life must receive an opportunity to hear in the next life?

Does not the New Testament itself indicate that Jesus descended into hell and “preached to the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:18–20)? Certainly a God of love, One who “takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezek. 33:11), and One who is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, NKJV), would provide an opportunity to those who have never heard, would He not? If God is loving and God is just, would it not be unfair to condemn those who have not *believed* simply because they have not *heard*?

Although there are some theologians who suggest that God will present the Gospel as often as needed to finally convince *all* unbelievers to repent (see chapter 2), we are not here considering a second chance offer of the Gospel. Our question concerns those who have not heard even once. The view that all will have the Gospel presented to them at least once has

sometimes been called “universal explicit opportunity” and says that every person will hear the Gospel in an overt fashion, even (if necessary) after his or her earthly demise.

One evangelical roundly criticizes Christians who “seriously maintain and defend the notion that God will be sending to hell millions upon millions of people who lacked the opportunity to call on the name of Jesus.” “What drives people more than anything else into the camp of theological relativism,” suggests this same writer, “is the impression they have that the God of orthodox theology is harshly exclusive by nature.” To correct this impression we must make it as clear as possible “that classical Christology does not entail a restrictive soteriological scenario.”²

But life itself appears to entail a “restrictive soteriological scenario,” does it not? That is, a very small percentage of the total world population hears and responds to the Gospel of Christ. Therefore the suggestions are made that either God might save the unevangelized through general revelation, supernaturally reveal Christ to the one seeking, or even use death as the avenue of proclaiming the Good News of Christ to those who have never heard.

But before we discuss the possibility of after-death opportunities to hear the Gospel, we must ask some questions about general revelation. Every human being, according to Romans 1 and Psalm 19, is daily exposed to information about the God of creation. Perhaps the truth received through general revelation, if properly responded to, can save those who never explicitly hear the Gospel of Christ.

Can General Revelation Save?

In the children’s classic *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, Rebecca struggled with whether or not she should become a missionary. She says to herself: “It isn’t as if the heathen really needed me; I’m sure they’ll come out all right in the end . . . they’ll find God somehow, sometime.” “What if they die first?” asked Emma Jane. “Oh, well, they can’t be blamed for that; they don’t die on purpose.”

What about those who die before they hear the Gospel? William Cowper, the eighteenth-century English poet, once asked, are thousands “lost in endless woe, for ignorance of what they could not know?” Biblical statements such as John 14:6 (“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”), Acts 4:12 (“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved”), and Romans 10:14 (“How can they hear without someone preaching to them?”) appear to exclude the possibility of salvation apart from an explicit presentation of the Gospel.

According to *Operation World 21st Century Edition*, of the world’s 12,000 ethnolinguistic peoples, “about 3,000–3,600 are ‘World A’ peoples in which less than 50% are likely to have heard the gospel.” With a population of over 6 billion, there are many who have not heard a clear gospel witness.

Twenty years ago demographers predicted that by the year 2,000 the world’s population would number close to ten billion—“the world’s projected ultimate population size.” Although that prediction did not come to pass, it was also said back in 1981 that there were between 25,000 and 30,000 “people groups” in the world of which about 3,000 “unreached people groups” are identified and cataloged. “Some 10,000 languages and dialects are said to exist in the world of which only 1,500 have even a part of the Word of God,” this researcher wrote. The need for cross-cultural missionaries is great for “ninety-five percent of all missionaries work among peoples who have already been evangelized. Unless present missionaries are redeployed

and new missionaries are directed to the unreached, the dark side of the globe will not only continue in darkness but will continue to multiply in that darkness.”

There is some encouraging news, however, according to *Operation World*. The “Jesus” film project “has had 4.1 billion individual viewings—maybe representing 3 billion people and has yielded over 128 million enquirers.”

If it is true that “most human beings who have ever lived have never heard about the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus,” then the crucial question is quite simply: “[D]oes a person have to hear about and believe in Christ before death in order to receive salvation?”⁹ Theologians are divided on the issue of whether the unevangelized billions are really lost without an explicit presentation of the Gospel of Christ.

Salvation Apart from an Explicit Gospel Presentation

One writer, representing the viewpoint which says that if the unevangelized respond to the light they have they can be saved, comments on the apparently exclusive biblical texts (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; and Rom. 10:14) by saying that “it is not certain from these passages that one must hear of Christ in this life to obtain salvation. They simply say there is no other way to heaven except through the work of Christ; they do not say one has to know about that work in order to benefit from the work.”

However, Jesus clearly said to the Jews of His day: “If you do not believe that I am who I claim to be, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). His statement specifically implies that a certain amount of knowledge of and positive response to His person is a necessary requirement for *not* dying in one’s sins. Those who hold that the unevangelized can be saved apart from an explicit presentation of the Gospel might respond to this text by saying, “The Jews had Jesus right in front of them! They were responsible for the incredible light they received. This argument cannot be applied to those who have never even heard of Jesus!”

Some theologians attempt to solve the problem of the untold billions by suggesting that God’s revelation of Himself through man’s nature, the world’s history, and the created universe might bring salvation. If someone who has not heard the Gospel were to respond to what is revealed of the Creator God through those three avenues, he might be redeemed on the basis of the work of Christ (although unknown to him). It seems reasonable, it is argued, that a person will be judged by the knowledge that he possesses, not condemned for information he does not have. As one writer put it, “there is a possibility of salvation for the hidden peoples who, by the way of grace through faith, recognize their need and repent before God, seeking his forgiveness.”

Frequently an appeal is made to those under the Old Testament economy who were saved without any explicit knowledge of Christ. Osburn says, “If the eternal God ... has applied Christ’s blood to people of faith in the Old Testament who [had] no knowledge of Jesus, why can he not do likewise for the unreached person today who has no explicit knowledge of Christ but may believe in the One who raised Jesus from the dead (cf. Rom. 4:23–24)?”

Salvation apart from an explicit Gospel presentation is also supported, it is said, by Revelation 5:9 which states that Christ’s blood “purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” Osburn continues his argument emphasizing:

This is not only a great source of comfort for those missionaries who feel that their work is bearing no fruit but also a fulfillment of Genesis 12:3 (that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through Abram). Yet if there will be Christians in heaven from among every people group and language, what can be done with those civilizations and small tribes who have disappeared without ever having a missionary witness because of war, or

disease, or natural calamity? These verses seem to indicate that there may be members of even these peoples who will be in heaven, so God must have dealt with them in a special way.

“Perhaps conservative Christianity should at least allow for the possibility of the salvation of those very few unreached people who apparently do seek God, grope for him, and find him (cf. Acts 17:27),” concludes the above critic. We must avoid a “too-confident and sweeping dogmatism against the feasibility of salvation for some of those who have never heard,” warns this writer, or we will be “adding unnecessarily to ‘the offense of the cross.’”

Sir Norman Anderson grappled with the issue of those who have never heard and asked the pointed question: “Might it not be true of the follower of some other religion that the God of all mercy had worked in his heart by his Spirit, bringing him in some measure to realize his sin and need for forgiveness, and enabling him, in his twilight as it were, to throw himself on God’s mercy?”

God is certainly capable of saving those who have never received an explicit presentation of the Gospel on the basis of their response to the witness of general revelation, say certain scholars. However, others suggest that because general revelation cannot save, but only condemn, special revelation about Christ is needed for conversion.

Salvation Comes Only by an Explicit Gospel Presentation

One argument used by these theologians is that the unevangelized *have* heard the witness of creation (as expressed in Rom. 10:18) and that creation’s witness brings enough information about God to convince the seeker that he or she is lost. According to Romans 1:18–21, man’s own conscience condemns him, revealing his inadequacy to live up to his own moral standards. “Scripture gives no clear statement on the salvation of those who have never heard the name,” emphasizes Bruce Nicholls. He further states, “We have little evidence of those who without knowing the name of Jesus fulfill the condition of salvation. We can only affirm that salvation from beginning to end is the work of God in Christ. None are saved by their good works or because they have lived according to the light they have received. In practice general revelation becomes a vehicle for divine judgment and not for salvation.”

Responding to S.D.F. Salmond’s contention that, “We need nothing beyond Paul’s broad statement that those who have the law shall be judged by the law, and that those who are without law shall be judged without law,” J. Ronald Blue argues that this reference to Romans 2:12 misses Paul’s point entirely. Paul is not arguing that some will not be judged because they did not have the law. Rather he is arguing that all will be judged according to the information they have. The term “judged” is better translated “perish,” that is, “those who have sinned without the Law will perish just as surely as those who have sinned with the Law ... The argument of the passage is not to excuse men but to show that they have no excuse.”

Harold Lindsell also emphasizes the fact that “general revelation, to be a vehicle of salvation, must insist that God is revealed sufficiently so as to restore the broken relationship with man ... But the essence of special revelation is the truth that God is not revealed unto salvation in general revelation ... This much is perfectly evident: general revelation is totally insufficient as a vehicle for salvation.”

Blue makes it clear that “the judgment of God in relation to the untold billions of the world is not based on their response to unrevealed truth but to revelation they *have* received.” God’s truth is made clear to all men through conscience and creation, according to Romans 1:19–20. Humans are without excuse. Blue expresses this thrust of Romans: “There is sufficient

knowledge for each person after the fall to be criminally liable for sin.” “The issue therefore,” he says, “is not that the unevangelized have not put their trust in a Person of whom they have never heard, but that they have suppressed the truth they have both received and understood.”²¹

The purpose of Romans 1:18–32 is “to show that the wrath of God is being revealed against all godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” “Clearly in Paul’s mind,” asserts Nicholls, “there is no salvation in God’s universal revelation in nature or in conscience, not because they are not valid paths to a true knowledge of God, but because of the enormity of human sin and rebellion so that all men are blinded to their truths.” The Bible makes it clear that “though all men have the possibility of a true knowledge of God, all are under the wrath of God, for there is no salvation for those who reject or pervert God’s universal revelation of love and justice.”²⁴

Clark Pinnock, on the other hand, argues that a lack of knowledge of Christ is not sufficient to send one of hell. “Of one thing we can be certain: God will not abandon in hell those who have not known and therefore have not declined His offer of grace. Though He has not told us the nature of His arrangements, we cannot doubt the existence and goodness of them.”

Blue takes great exception to Pinnock’s position. God *has* told us of His arrangements, says Blue. He then summarizes the main argument of Romans 1 and 2 by stating that the apparently innocent “heathen” are far from innocent. Their consciences and creation itself clearly reveal God’s existence and attributes. However, the unevangelized have repressed God’s truth through general revelation, giving expression to that rejection through degraded thoughts, emotions, and actions. “No matter how isolated a man may be from the revelation of God’s righteousness in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” Blue argues, “that man is entirely without excuse. The wrath of God is on him because of his ungodliness and unrighteousness, not because of his lack of faith in Christ.”

Blue also points out that those who hold to the possibility of salvation apart from an explicit presentation of the Gospel sometimes even suggest that the idolatrous actions of the unevangelized reveal their search for the real God. “Idolatry is viewed as piety and reverence yet to be perfected. Nothing could be further from the truth. These are not gropings for God. They are evidence of rebellion against God. ‘The idolatrous systems of the world,’ says Watts, ‘are actually states of man’s departure from God and expression of his desire for other gods rather than the true, living God.’ ”

“The world’s untold billions are *lost!*” Blue proclaims, and they *need* to hear the Gospel. Only Jesus Christ can bridge the gap between a holy God and sinful men and women. How will the unevangelized hear? “Human agents must be mobilized by the Lord to cross the frontiers that stand as barriers to Gospel presentation. God has so willed it . . . There is not a single line in the Book of Acts to suggest that God can save a human being without employing a human agent. On the contrary there are several examples of God’s going to great lengths to secure the active cooperation of one or another of His servants.”

Those who grapple with the truth of the untold billions might be sincere in suggesting that they can be saved through general revelation, but they are sincerely (and scripturally) mistaken. Special revelation is needed for salvation.

Supernaturally-given Special Revelation

The New Testament reveals God as one who not only can supernaturally whisk away Philip from an Ethiopian convoy (Acts 8), but who can also convert an accessory to murder by the name of

Saul of Tarsus through a miraculous vision on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). This God of the New Covenant is also free to rather unexpectedly (and supernaturally) provide the very orthodox Peter with a smorgasbord of unclean entrées to teach him to share the Gospel with the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10).

One observer suggests concerning the one who has not heard the Gospel:

If he sincerely accepts the verdict of guilty handed down by his conscience, thereby recognizing that he is a sinner in desperate need of the Lawgiver's grace, then the stage is set for that person's encounter with God's special revelation. This may consist of the Gospel or the Scriptures, but it may also be in the form of dreams or visions (Daniel 2; Acts 9:3ff.), an angel (Rev. 14), or through oral tradition.

In some situations that supernaturally-given special revelation may be the provision of a missionary who has seen that "the fields ... are ripe for harvest" (John 4:35). Many converts from other religions to Christianity "recognize the continuity between their new experience of God in Christ and their former search for God." Don Richardson, the late veteran missionary who held that special revelation is needed for salvation, points out in *Eternity in Their Hearts* that many tribal communities immediately respond to the Christian Gospel when they first hear it because they understand it as the fulfillment of their search for atonement or appeasement in sacrifice.

God is certainly free to supernaturally reveal Himself to those who never receive a Gospel witness, but such a hope should not weaken our missionary efforts or concern for the unevangelized. Although Paul's conversion came through his miraculous vision, he pursued his calling to be a witness to the Gentile and Jewish worlds through the time-honored practice of wearing out shoe leather—personally going to those who needed to hear the Gospel.

J.I. Packer aptly warns us that "we have no warrant from Scripture to expect that God will act [to bring salvation through general revelation] in any single case where the Gospel is not yet known. To cherish this hope, therefore, is not to diminish in the slightest our urgent and never-ending missionary obligation ... Living by the Bible means assuming that no one will be saved apart from faith in Christ, and acting accordingly." "Our job, after all," Packer reminds us, "is to spread the Gospel, not to guess what might happen to those to whom it never comes."³³

We agree with those evangelical scholars who "see lostness as the most agonizing question concerning the Christian church especially in those contexts where Christianity is a minority faith." Although God may (if He so chooses) save those (who never hear an explicit gospel presentation) on the basis of their positive response to the witness of general revelation or might supernaturally provide special revelation about Christ to such people, we cannot build our mission strategies on such speculations.

But what about those who die before a missionary or a vision ever gets to them? Is it possible that evangelical Christians have been far too pessimistic about death? Are the billions who have died without ever hearing of Christ eternally lost? Perhaps Bible-believing Christians have made too much of death.

Death and Fences

The story is told of a lawyer who was on his deathbed, busily thumbing through his Bible. "Bill," a friend said to him, "I didn't know you were religious." "I'm not," the lawyer replied, "I'm

looking for a loophole!” Might death itself provide such a “loophole” for those who have never heard the Gospel?

The evangelical theologian Donald Bloesch states: “We do not wish to build fences around God’s grace . . . and we do not preclude the possibility that some in hell might finally be translated into heaven.” This writer is certainly correct that Christians have not been given the task of fence building. It sounds very spiritual to say that God’s grace has no fences, or to imply that such fences are not as imposing as once thought.

However, are there *no* fences around God’s grace? The failure to recognize God-revealed limits to His grace, as explained in the Scriptures, is a serious error. Jesus declared that one day the “door” will be shut (Luke 13:25), and He Himself is described in Revelation as the One who “holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open” (Rev. 3:7). There will come a time when it will be “too late” for salvation (cf. Luke 12:35–48).

Bloesch has expressed an agnosticism concerning the fate of the wicked by saying that “we cannot know on the basis of what is revealed in Scripture . . . whether God will . . . transform into his likeness even the most rebellious of his enemies, or . . . destroy those forms of life that are out of harmony with his new creation.”

Such universalistic or annihilationist speculations sound merciful, but does Jesus not clearly state that “broad is the road that leads to destruction” and “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt. 7:13–14, NIV)? Does the Lord not also emphasize that between those in hell and those in heaven there is a “great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us”? (Luke 16:26, NKJV) A *chasm*, rather than merely a fence, is the biblical image here.

We observed in chapter two that some hold the view that hell will be a kind of school which will drive men and women to accept the Gospel. What purgatory does for the Roman Catholics, hell (in the minds of some theologians) does for those who have not received Christ. However, Dorothy Sayers seems much more in line with the teaching of Scripture when she says in her introduction to Dante’s *Inferno* that

hell itself is not remedial; the dead who have chosen the “eternal exile” from God, and who thus experience the reality of their choice, cannot profit by that experience. In that sense, no living soul can enter Hell, since, however great the sin, repentance is always possible while there is life, even to the very moment of dying. But the vision of Hell, which is remedial, is the soul’s self-knowledge in all its evil potentialities—the revelation of the nature of impenitent sin.

To suggest that there will be potential transfer from the realm of the wicked dead to the fellowship of Christ in heaven is to reason contrary to Christ’s teaching in Luke 16. Apparently (according to such scholars), there will be no “chasm” as Jesus taught (v. 26). Presumably He was either perpetuating Jewish myths about the fate of the wicked, or He was wrong about hell’s permanence.

C.S. Lewis’ story of a bus trip from hell to heaven (*The Great Divorce*), as Lewis himself tells us, is not meant to “arouse factual curiosity about the details of the afterworld.” It is written to show the many reasons why some, even if given an opportunity to take a day excursion from hell to heaven, would not be happy there; it would simply not suit them.

Jesus is clearly teaching in Luke 16 that no missionary efforts from the heavenly realms will be allowed to reach into hell. Furthermore, none in hell will be able to change locations. Presumably, in their blasphemous rebellion they will not want to.

It is interesting in the Luke 16 passage that the rich man is not concerned about escaping hell himself; he only requests, first, water to alleviate his tormented tongue, and, second, a warning for his five brothers that they would not follow him to that “place of torment” (v. 28). Evidently he knew that no eternal change of residence was possible. As C.S. Lewis has expressed it, sin is man saying to God throughout his life, “Leave me alone, God!” And hell is God’s way of finally saying to man, “You may have your wish.”

The Finality of Death

“If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into Heaven?” I asked the children in my Sunday School class. “NO!” the children all answered. “If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven?” Again, the answer was, “NO!” “Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children, and loved my wife, would that get me into Heaven?” I asked them again. Again, they all answered, “NO!” “Well”, I continued, “then how can I get into Heaven?” A five-year-old boy shouted out, “YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!”

Richard Leakey, the Kenyan anthropologist and author, was once asked the question: “What happens after death?” To which he replied, “I don’t think anything need happen.” Comedian Woody Allen once remarked: “It’s not that I’m afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens!” *Newsday* magazine once asked a number of celebrities to write their own epitaphs. The comedienne Joan Rivers wanted hers to read: “Wait! Can we talk?” The late Erma Bombeck once said: “I have learned to take labels seriously. I have devoted my life to making sure my yeast doesn’t expire, my film doesn’t run out of time, or my batteries pass away.” But was *she* ready to die?

In an article entitled “Whistling Past the Graveyard,” author Marvin Olasky discusses the range of books which need to be published regarding death. “Someone needs to answer the question, ‘How then shall we die?’”⁴⁰ Olasky gives quotes of several famous people about death: For example, American liberal minister Henry Ward Beecher’s last words were: “Now comes the mystery.” Mark Twain, who became a bitter man as he approached old age, wrote in his private notebooks, “O Death where is thy sting? It has none. But life has.” George Santayana, a popular philosopher, said, “There is no cure for birth and death but to enjoy the interval.” Woody Allen said, “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying.” Science-fiction novelist Isaac Asimov declared his dislike for both heaven and hell: “I don’t believe in an afterlife, so I don’t have to spend my whole life fearing hell, or fearing heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse.”

But is death as innocent and insignificant as some imply? Those who suggest that death should not be seen as the “decisive barrier of time for people to make a decision of faith” must come to grips with the teaching of the New Testament on the issue.

The Teaching of Paul

Paul, for example, in a passage teaching the resurrection of believers, writes that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then “those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost” (1 Cor. 15:18). The expression “fallen asleep in Christ” obviously refers to physical death (sleep is frequently used as a metaphor of a believer’s death, see John 11:11 and Acts 7:60). Paul’s point is that “the foundational assumption of ... all of Scripture ... is that one’s spiritual condition at death determines whether or not he will inherit eternal life.”

In a passage which argues against the doctrine of “soul-sleep,” Paul claims that to be “at home in the body” is to be “away from the Lord” and to be “away from the body” is to be “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6–9). The apostle certainly appears to be teaching that the one who has trusted Christ goes immediately into His presence at death. Likewise, the one who is not redeemed goes immediately to a place of torment and separation from God’s presence (Luke 16).

Paul did not consider death as an opportunity to receive the Gospel. Rather, he describes death as “the last enemy to be destroyed” by the reigning Christ (1 Cor. 15:26).

The Teaching of Jesus

Jesus had much to say about the morbid subject of death and its finality. His poignant question, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36) implies that one may so conduct his affairs in life that he not only misses *this* life, but the *next* as well. “Or what,” Jesus asks in the passage, “can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:37) The forfeiture of one’s essential being (one’s “soul”) is the issue here.

In John’s Gospel Jesus deliberately discusses death. For example, Jesus teaches that “whoever hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). “Death” in this verse seems to refer to a condition of spiritual separation from God. That decision to move out of the realm of spiritual death into the realm of eternal life is made in this life, not after one has died!

As the One who has the power to raise the dead (John 5:21), Jesus declares that a day is coming when “all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28–29). No hint is given by Jesus that one can add to one’s record of deeds *after* death, nor does Jesus give any support to the idea that one’s spiritual status may be altered in any way after physical death.

With words that should have sent shivers down their spines, Jesus warns the Jews of the danger of unbelief, “I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come” (John 8:21). Jesus uses this same expression of “dying in one’s sins” three verses later where He says: “I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (v. 24). The finality of one’s earthly response to Christ in all the horror of “dying in one’s sins” is clear.

“My sheep,” Jesus says, “listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27–28). The giving of eternal life occurs prior to one’s physical death. Jesus’ promise that such shall “never perish” must refer to spiritual separation, because *He* perished, as did all of His disciples (most by martyrdom). Physical death His followers will experience; spiritual death will not, however, be their portion.

An undertaker in Washington, D.C. drives a hearse with a license plate on the back which reads “U-2-1-DAY” and closes his business letters with the expression “Eventually yours”! The denial of death’s finality is understandable when one is grappling with the issue of the “untold billions who are still untold.” However, we dare not go beyond Scripture’s clear teaching that one’s eternal destiny is settled at death. 2 Kings 20:1 makes it clear that the putting of one’s house in order occurs in *this* life.

Hebrews 10:31 declares that “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” The context of Hebrews 10 is that of ignoring the truth, rejecting the law of Moses, and dying without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses (v. 28). If one rejects God’s truth in this life, “no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire

that will consume the enemies of God” (vv. 26–27). God is a God who will repay; “It is mine to avenge”; “the Lord will judge His people” (v. 30). Then verse 31 says that “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The late Canadian novelist Robertson Davies once prayed, “Oh God, don’t let me die *stupid!*” Those who die without trusting Him, Jesus says, are like an astute farmer who built bigger barns but forgot the unpredictable inevitability of death and ignored the fate of his soul (Luke 12:13–21).

Hebrews 10:31’s declaration that “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” is in the context of Jews who had the law of Moses. What about the billions who have not even heard of Moses? Is there any scriptural evidence that they, after death, might receive an opportunity to hear the Gospel?

Christ’s “Descent into Hades”

In C.S. Lewis’ *The Great Divorce*, one of the ghosts who took the bus trip from hell to heaven asks one of heaven’s “solid people,” “Since you people are so full of love, why did you not go down to Hell to rescue the Ghosts? One would have expected a more militant charity!”

Is there evidence, perhaps, of Jesus Himself going down to the realm of the wicked dead and, by an act of “militant charity,” proclaiming the Gospel to those who have never heard? Some argue that “if people will be condemned only for their rejection of the Savior, then they will have to be given an opportunity, sometime, to accept or reject him.” Perhaps that opportunity will be after death. Although those who hold to a postmortem opportunity for conversion acknowledge that the biblical support for this position is lacking, 1 Peter 3:18–20 is sometimes brought forth. Those three verses simply state:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water.

History of the Doctrine

The Apostles’ Creed uses the expression “He descended into hell (Hades),” the Latin phrase being *descendit in inferna*. The idea that Jesus descended into Hades between His death and His resurrection was espoused by Clement of Alexandria (ca. 155–ca. 220), who included the heathen with the saints, martyrs, and Old Testament prophets as those to whom the Gospel was preached. Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 265–ca. 339) also held to the descent into Hades doctrine.

One of the strongest advocates of the doctrine was Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254), the scholar who was the church’s first universalist. He argued that “[Christ’s] soul, stripped of the body, did there (in Hades) hold converse with other souls that were in like manner stripped, that He might there convert those who were capable of instruction, or were otherwise in ways known to Him fit for it.”

Other church fathers who held to the descent into Hades view were Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 310–ca. 386), Athanasius (ca. 296–ca. 373), Ambrose (ca. 339–ca. 397), and Jerome (ca. 345–ca. 419). Augustine rejects the view, listing it as a heresy.

Although the descent into Hades view was tenaciously held during the Middle Ages (between the fall of Rome in 476 and the Protestant Reformation, beginning about 1500), the

Reformers rejected it for three reasons. The first reason was that it was simply a traditional, rather than a scriptural, doctrine. The second reason was that it appeared to give some support to the Roman Catholic dogma of purgatory. The third reason was that it appeared late in the creeds of the church. The phrase “He descended into hell” does not appear in the AD150 or the AD350 versions of the Apostles’ Creed; it is not until AD700 that the phrase occurs.

Suggested Interpretations

Many Christians are probably not aware of the significance of the expression “He descended into hell” when they recite the Apostles’ Creed. The idea of Christ’s “descent” is usually connected with 1 Peter 3:18–20, which we shall examine presently.

Roman Catholic writers suggest that between His death and resurrection Christ descended to a place designated as *limbus patrum* (a chamber for Old Testament saints who were waiting to be admitted to the presence of God). The teaching is that Christ in His spirit went to the *limbus patrum* while His body lay in the grave and in His resurrection brought forth the spirits of the Old Testament saints and conducted them to heaven.

Lutheran writers understand the descent as Christ proclaiming His victory over the powers of darkness, pronouncing their sentence of condemnation. John Calvin takes a metaphorical view of the expression (“He descended into Hades”), concluding that it refers to the penal sufferings of Christ on the cross, where He really endured the pangs of hell.

Some theologians put great hope in the descent into Hades doctrine, assuming that it is solidly based on the 1 Peter passage. Theologian Donald Bloesch confidently declares, “We can affirm salvation on the other side of the grave, since this has scriptural warrant (cf. Isa. 26:19; John 5:25–29; Eph. 4:8–9; 1 Peter 3:19–20; 4:6); yet we cannot preach that any of those who are banished to hell will finally be saved.”

This same theologian also argues that Hades “is not yet hell” and that the intermediate state of the lost (“Hades”) is a “state of inner torment or lostness.” “It should nonetheless be pointed out,” he says, “that God is present in this so-called realm of the dead, and is in absolute control.... This realm is not outside the compass of the Gospel, since our Lord preached to the spirits who were in prison (1 Peter 3:19–20).”

Another writer, commenting on the passage in 1 Peter, is in agreement with this position and states that “Jesus, as a spirit, appeared to fallen spirits, to some as Conqueror and Judge, to others, who still stretched out to Him the hand of faith, as a Savior ... the preaching of Christ begun in the realms of departed spirits is continued there ... so that those who (here) on earth did not hear at all, or not in the right way, the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, shall hear it there.”

Clark Pinnock is optimistic in his application of 1 Peter 3 to the fate of those who have never heard. He states that “Peter in his first epistle adds an important clue when he speaks of the Gospel being preached to the dead. Though far from exegetically certain, it is held by some interpreters (as reputable as Cranfield and Pannenberg) that death is the occasion when the unevangelized have an opportunity to make a decision about Jesus Christ.”

John Sanders is honest in his treatment when he acknowledges that “on biblical grounds it is quite uncertain whether 1 Peter or the doctrine of Christ’s descent have anything to do with a future opportunity to hear the Gospel.” He does argue, however, that “the concept of God giving the unevangelized a future opportunity to accept or reject Christ is on solid ground theologically ... It seems correct to say that people will be condemned only for rejecting Jesus Christ. This would make it essential that they be given an opportunity to do so either in this life or the next.”⁵²

Five views of this “descent into Hades” have been commonly held:

(1) One popular view is that Christ preached through the Holy Spirit through Noah as he was building the ark. He was preaching to those who were unbelievers on the earth but now are people in hell (“spirits in prison”). Augustine and Aquinas held this view.

(2) Another view is that Christ personally went and preached to people in hell between His death and resurrection, offering them a second chance of salvation. Several commentators hold this position.

(3) The third view is similar to the second in that Christ preached between His death and His resurrection to people in hell, but rather than offering them a second chance of salvation, He was declaring His triumph and their condemnation. The seventeenth century seemed to favor this third view, sometimes referred to as the “orthodox Lutheran theory.”

(4) Another view holds that after Christ died, He declared release to the people who had repented just before they died in the flood. He then led them out of their imprisonment in purgatory into heaven. This has been a common Roman Catholic position.

(5) The final view appears to be the dominant view today. It holds that after Christ’s death He traveled to hell and announced His triumph over the fallen angels who had sinned by intermarrying with human women before the flood. However, with the evangelical drift away from the finality of death and the doctrine of hell, one would not be surprised to see the second view (a second-chance salvation position) become the most popular of these interpretations.

Wayne Grudem suggests that the three pivotal questions to be asked of this text in 1 Peter are: (1) Who are the “spirits in prison”? (2) What did Christ preach? and, (3) When did He preach? We will briefly discuss each in turn.

Who Are the “Spirits in Prison”?

Grudem’s answer to this question is that the “spirits in prison” must be understood to be human spirits, not angelic spirits. He observes, “When Peter defined the ‘spirits in prison’ as those ‘who disobeyed in the days of Noah when God’s patience waited during the building of the ark,’ it is very unlikely that he would have expected his readers to identify them as disobedient angels . . . Our conclusion is that the ‘spirits in prison’ are the human beings who disobeyed at the time Noah was building the ark and who were destroyed in the flood.”⁵⁶

What Did Christ Proclaim?

The focus in the text is that of Noah’s preaching, or more accurately, Christ’s preaching by means of the Spirit through Noah. The Greek verb for “preach” (*kerysso*) in the text suggests a preaching of repentance, rather than a preaching of condemnation (the latter sitting better with views three or five above).

View four, which says that Christ proclaimed to Old Testament believers His finished work of redemption, is also not supported by the context. As Grudem argues, “The mention of ‘prison’ and disobedience, as well as the waiting of the patience of God, and the comment that only eight were saved, all point to preaching directed to sinners who needed repentance, not to righteous saints waiting to hear a glad cry of victory.”

The proclamation to sinners of their need to repent and trust in God fits the overall context of 1 Peter, that is, of being a good witness in the circumstance of hostile unbelievers. The immediate context, that of “always being ready ... to give an account for the hope ... in you” (3:15–16, NASB), seems to support this view that Christ was proclaiming the need to repent through Noah.

When Did Christ Preach?

If, indeed, the “spirits in prison” are people who disobeyed God during Noah’s lifetime and the message preached to them was that of the need for repentance, then views three, four, and five are eliminated. Grudem argues that a decision between view one (Christ preached through Noah at the time the ark was built) and view two (Christ preached between His death and resurrection, giving those who disobeyed before the flood a second chance for salvation) can be decided if one can establish the time at which the preaching took place.

This preaching of Christ could have occurred chronologically after His death and resurrection, for verse 18 of the text refers to Christ’s being “put to death” and then being “made alive by the Spirit.” We are then given the statement that “by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison” (v. 19). Grudem argues that Peter’s use of the phrase “by whom” does not necessarily imply that the preaching must follow chronologically the death and resurrection of Christ. Sometimes Peter uses this stylistic phrase as a literary device when changing to a different subject.

From a logical point of view, the interpretation that Christ proclaims the message of salvation sometime after His death to the spirits in prison appears to violate Peter’s message to his readers to persevere as faithful witnesses. What sense would this view make of the context in which Peter urges his readers to be faithful witnesses even if they should have to suffer, if “he then proceeds to tell them that even the worst sinners in all history ... can be given another chance to repent after they have died?” Such a view seems to be contradictory to his purpose in writing.

If view two (the second-chance view) is the correct one, “why [are] only sinners who disobeyed during the building of the ark ... given another opportunity to repent?” “Why not others as well, especially those who had no chance to hear the warnings to repent?” Grudem rightly points out that “the idea of a chance of salvation after death is difficult to reconcile with other parts of the New Testament (cf. Luke 16:26; Heb. 9:27).”

In support of view one (that Christ was preaching through Noah during the building of the ark), Peter himself refers to the “spirit of Christ” moving the prophets to predict the “sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (1 Peter 1:11, NASB). Therefore, it is not inconceivable that Peter understood that the spirit of Christ was active in Noah as he preached to the generation prior to the flood.

Grudem shows several parallels between view one and the larger context of 1 and 2 Peter. He summarizes by saying, “[View one] sits well with Peter’s purpose of encouraging suffering believers that they need not fear to be righteous and to bear faithful witness to the hostile unbelievers surrounding them, for Christ is at work in them as he was in Noah, and they, like Noah, will certainly be saved from the judgment to come.”⁶⁴

“In fact,” he continues, “it is the remarkable similarity between the situations of Noah and of Peter’s readers which best explains why Peter, in reaching back to the Old Testament for an encouraging example, selects the incident of Noah preparing the ark. Far from being surprising or unusual, this example is contextually quite appropriate.”

Grudem argues that the phrase “who formerly were disobedient” (1 Peter 3:20) should really be translated as an adverbial use of the participle: “when they formerly disobeyed.” He

concludes that Christ preached to the spirits who are now in prison but He did so “when they formerly disobeyed,” that is, during the preaching ministry of Noah.

To the question “why did Peter not say that Christ preached ‘through Noah?’ ” Grudem responds that it is very difficult to answer why a writer did not write something in a particular way. Furthermore, Peter’s readers would have understood verse 20 (“when they formerly disobeyed”) “much more readily than we do, especially since our minds are cluttered by English translations which say ‘who formerly disobeyed.’ ” That is, Peter’s readers would have understood that Christ’s preaching was during the time of and through Noah, rather than between His death and resurrection.

Grudem concludes this discussion by paraphrasing verses 19 and 20 as follows: “In the spiritual realm of existence Christ went and preached through Noah to those who are now spirits in the prison of hell. This happened when they formerly disobeyed, when the patience of God was waiting in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.”

Grudem’s view agrees with that of Louis Berkhof who argued that “Scripture certainly does not teach a literal descent of Christ into hell.” He could not have bodily descended into hell, for His body was in the grave. If He did descend into hell, then He did so only by means of His soul, and, Berkhof argues, “this would mean that only half of His human nature shared in this stage of His humiliation (or exaltation).”⁶⁹ Furthermore, this descent could not have been a triumphal march, for Christ had not yet risen from the dead. As well, at the time of His death Christ commended His spirit to His father, which “seems to indicate that He would be passive rather than active from the time of His death until He arose from the grave.”

Other scholars disagree with the interpretation of 1 Peter 3 that Christ preached through Noah to unrepentant human beings during the ark’s preparation. One writer argues that “1 Peter 3:19 has nothing to do with a descent of Christ to hades, or a second chance for the dead, but refers to a tradition not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament that after his resurrection Christ proclaimed his victory to the fallen angels in the ‘prison’ where they were awaiting their final punishment.”

What is categorically clear is that 1 Peter 3 records no positive response to what was preached and therefore provides no basis for conversion after death. As understandable as the hope for after-death conversion opportunities might be, we agree with Schaff who said: “We do not know whether Christ was in hell; but we do know from his own lips that he was in paradise between his death and resurrection.”

Scripture does not teach salvation on the other side of the grave, despite appeals to Acts 2:25–31 (quoting Ps. 16:8–11), Ephesians 4:8–9, and 1 Peter 4:6. Acts 2:27 (which the KJV translates as “Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell”) does not teach a descent into hades by Christ, but rather that the Father would not abandon Christ to the grave; Jesus would not be left to the power of death. This interpretation is consistent with Peter’s statement in Acts 2:30–31, as well as with Paul’s declaration in Acts 13:34–35 (both instances quote Ps. 16 to prove the resurrection of Christ).

Ephesians 4:8–9 (Christ “descended to the lower, earthly regions”) seems best understood as referring to the Lord’s incarnation, rather than a descent into hades. 1 Peter 4:6 (“The Gospel was preached even to those who are now dead”) does not support the idea of an after-death opportunity for conversion, but its opposite. That is, “the ‘dead’ to whom the Gospel was preached were evidently not yet dead when it was preached unto them, since the purpose of this preaching was in part ‘that they might be judged according to men in the flesh.’ This could only take place during their life on earth.”

Conclusion

The debate concerning whether or not general revelation can save those who never hear the Gospel will continue. Our responsibility is to share the Gospel wherever we can, for the world's billions without Christ are lost.

No scriptural evidence may be brought forth to lessen death's finality. Death ends a person's redeemability. Leo Tolstoy writes in his book *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* that Ivan screamed incessantly for three days before he died. We believers need to scream before people die, that they may accept the Gospel's message. Rather than seeing death as an opportunity for furthering one's spiritual "education" or changing one's spiritual status, we must declare death as man's enemy which slams the door on additional chances to respond to the claims of Christ. We must equally proclaim that the Victorious Lamb will destroy that last enemy death, casting it into "the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14).

The doctrine of Christ's "descent into hades," although supported by church tradition, is not based on a solid exegesis of Scripture. No clear texts teach the possibility of postmortem conversion. "It is appointed unto man once to die, but after this, the judgment" (Heb. 9:27, KJV). James Denney eloquently declared: "I dare not say to myself that if I forfeit the opportunity this life affords I shall ever have another, and therefore I dare not say so to another man." For those who have yet to receive their *first* opportunity, we ought to cry, "Lord, send out laborers for the harvest!"⁶

⁶ Dixon, L. (2003). [*The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell*](#) (pp. 119–145). Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.

TWO VIEWS OF HELL TEMPORARY

THE PURGATORIAL VIEW

Zachary J. Hayes

It is a common task of religion to provide some sense of meaning and direction for human life. Among other things, this generally means that religions deal with the so-called big questions: Where do we come from? Where are we going? How ought we most appropriately take up our life and move to our goal? If this is the common task of religion, Christianity does this in its own distinctive way.

There is a profound sense in which Christianity answers the question of our origin and our goal in one and the same word: God. When all is said and done about our biological and cosmic origins, there is an ultimate sense in which we are not only from our parents, from our family, or from our nation, but finally we are “from God.” Likewise, when all speculation about the future of the universe is finished, there is an ultimate sense in which we are simply “for God.” St. Augustine formulated this beautifully when he addressed God in the following words: “You have created us for yourself. And our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

If our origin is ultimately in God, so is our destiny. And if the question of our ultimate destiny is the heart of what we call “eschatology,” there is a sense in which Christian eschatology can be summed up in one word: God. Again, in the words of Augustine, “After this life, God himself is our place.” It is in God that we find our ultimate fulfillment. It is in relation to God that we are judged. And it is the final absence of God that is experienced as hellish isolation by the souls of the lost.

Some might see Augustine’s view as a radical reduction of Christian eschatology, and it certainly is that. Some Christians may even feel uncomfortable with it, especially if they think that the biblical revelation is a divine communication of detailed information about another world. Clearly such a reduced formulation seems light years away from the elaborate scenario of the last times and the final events that we find in theological books, catechisms, and sermons of Christian churches throughout the ages. From these we get the clear impression that Christian eschatology contains, in fact, a rather detailed geography of the “other world.” Some of this information about the “other side” seems related to insights of the Old Testament, and some of it seems similar to literature of other religious traditions. And yet other aspects of this scenario seem to be the fruit of a very active Christian imagination working throughout history.

A common feature of the Christian view of the world beyond is the affirmation of a heaven and a hell. While particular Christian traditions may fill out the details somewhat differently, they do generally agree that there is a final, positive relation with God that we can appropriately call “heaven.” And the mainline Christian churches at least agree on the possibility of human life ending in a final disaster which theologians commonly call “hell.” In the final analysis, most Christian theologians think of the final condition in these terms. But even here, we need to point

out that for some Christians, hell is clearly a fact, while for others it is a possibility, and for yet others, it is a situation that will eventually be overcome.

If the general understanding of Christian eschatology is this two-leveled pattern of heaven and hell, there is a theme in Roman Catholic theology which is not shared by other Christian churches; or at least, if the theme is present elsewhere, it is not understood in the same way. That theme can be summarized in the word “purgatory.” This word is commonly understood to refer to the state, place, or condition in the next world between heaven and hell, a state of purifying suffering for those who have died and are still in need of such purification. This purifying condition comes to an end for the individual when that person’s guilt has been expiated. But as an eschatological “place,” purgatory is understood to continue in existence until the last judgment, at which time there will be only heaven and hell. It is this theme of purgatory that concerns me in the present chapter.

PURGATORY AND THE INTERIM PERIOD

I shall begin this exploration of purgatory by distinguishing the concept of purgatory from related issues that might be confused with it. The concept of an interim period, for example, is common in Christian eschatology. It would be easy to confuse the two and to think that purgatory is just another name for the interim state. In fact, this would misunderstand both terms. Though the two concepts are related, they are by no means identical. It is possible to be convinced that there is such a thing as an interim state and to have a specific understanding of what is involved in such a state, and still be totally opposed to the idea of purgatory.

What, then, is meant by the interim period? Simply put, the idea of an interim period is an attempt to answer the question: “What happens to people when they die?” This is not first of all a Christian question. In fact, human beings have reflected on this question throughout history. The Greeks thought of an underworld. It is clear in the Bible that the Jewish vision of death and human destiny has a long and complex history. Ancient Jewish theology simply thought of the “shades” who existed in a condition that was neither good nor bad, but a sort of diminished existence (Gen. 37:35; Ps. 6:5). Only later did the Old Testament come to distinguish reward and punishment in the next life (Dan. 12:1–2). Thus, while the Old Testament had names for various situations beyond this life, Jewish thought is by no means uniform. Yet it provides the context within which Christian reflection on death and the beyond would take place. But the Jewish names for the places in the other world, such as *sheol* and *gehenna*, are not identical with the Christian concept of an interim period.

Christians have their own reasons for thinking of an interim period. If the term means that a situation exists “in between,” it is fair to ask: What is that situation, and what is it “between?” Where does the Christian concept of an interim state come from, and how does it influence the Christian understanding of the afterlife? It is my conviction that the idea of an interim period has its roots in the redemptive work of Christ.

Ever since the proclamation of the resurrection of the Lord, Christians have seen several levels of meaning in the mystery of the resurrection. First, it is a statement about what God has done in Jesus (Acts 2:24). As such, it can be seen as a statement about the personal destiny of Jesus of Nazareth with God. But as humanity is tied to the mystery of the first Adam in the Fall, so it is tied to the mystery of Jesus Christ, the second Adam, in the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:21–22). This means that the destiny of Jesus as an individual is intrinsically related to the destiny of humanity and the world. Therefore, from the earliest generations of Christian history there has been a sense of

completeness together with a sense of incompleteness. What God has done in Jesus is final, decisive, and irrevocable. God has “already” succeeded with eschatological finality in Jesus. But what has happened between Jesus and God has “not yet” worked itself out in the rest of humanity. Here is the basis for the great Christian vision of a “universal human community” in which God’s will to save humankind will come to final fruition. In this sense, there is something open-ended and incomplete about the mystery of Christ as long as history continues. It remains incomplete until it has worked itself out in all the redeemed. But that will be only at the end of history (Rom. 8:11, 23–24).

It is this understanding of the mystery of Christ in the early Christian community that led to the conviction that there is something “incomplete” about the situation, not only of believers in history but of those who have died. They are “in between”; that is, between death and that completion which is hoped for with the return of the Lord that brings history to an end. The history of salvation remains incomplete until the end. Therefore, the situation of all individuals remains incomplete until history has run its course.

In the third century, an author such as Origen emphasized this so strongly that he maintained there will be something “incomplete” about the mystery of Christ himself until the whole of his body has been brought to completion. Since, for Origen and for other early Christian writers, the body of Christ was understood to be the church, the completion of the mystery of Christ (head and body) will arrive only at the end of history when the mission of the church has been completed.

In other words, there is something incomplete about the situation of all who have died before the end of history and the return of the Lord in judgment at the parousia. And this, I believe, is the insight that is expressed in the concept of an interim state when it occurs in Christian theology. This concept says nothing about punishment or reward, but says simply: No individual is fully redeemed until all the redeemed are together in the body (Heb. 11:39–40), united with the head, the one mystery of Christ in its wholeness (cf. Eph. 4:13, 15).

From this it should be clear that Christians can readily think of an interim state without necessarily associating that state with suffering or with purgation. For some it is a state of “sleeping.” For Roman Catholic eschatology, it is an active state of being awake. Peculiar to Roman Catholic eschatology is the recognition that the interim state will involve some sort of purgative suffering for those who need it.

The point of our discussion up to here is simply that Christian theology, for Christological reasons, commonly thinks of an interim state. But Roman Catholic theology thinks of this state as a process of purgation or purification for certain needy people. This leads us to the next point: How are we to understand the concept of purification beyond death? This will unavoidably be a discussion of Roman Catholic theology which is not widely shared by other Christian traditions.

PURIFICATION AFTER DEATH

To understand the inner logic of the concept of purification after death, we need to think of a number of interrelated points. First, it is helpful to recall that symbolism about purgation does not begin with Roman Catholicism, nor with Christianity, nor even with the Bible. In fact, such symbolism is widespread in religious history. It is symbolism that reflects a sense of distance between human creatures and God. There is distance, first, because all creatures are limited and finite, while God is infinite. Second, there is distance because human creatures are sinners. Not only are human beings “less than God,” they are also “guilty before God.” Now, if the concern of

the religious journey is to move to ever greater closeness and intimacy with God in a relationship of love, one must ask how the distance between God and creature might be bridged.

However we might understand the process of bridging this gap (and I will say more about this later), it is common to think of some form of purification in the creature. And that purification is frequently expressed in symbols such as fire. The idea of a purifying fire was present in extrabiblical and in biblical tradition long before the Christian/Catholic concept of purgatory used it in its own way. When such symbolism is used in a Christian context, it expresses the conviction that something happens in the encounter between God and the human creature that makes the creature more “capable” of receiving the gift of divine presence within itself.

A second factor lies in the awareness that most people die with their life projects apparently unfinished, at least as things appear from this side of death. Roman Catholic eschatology sees individual death as the end of a person’s individual history, during which time that person’s eternal destiny is decided. There is no return to this life for a second chance. Yet most of us do not die as giants of faith. Therefore, it is unlikely that we shall immediately share the destiny of the heroic martyrs of faith. In other words, if we think of heaven as a condition of mutual and unhampered love between God and the human creature, most of us come to the end of our earthly course as flawed lovers, still incapable of love that is deep, broad, and sustained. This seems to be clear enough in the case of our human relations. It seems also to be true of our relation with God. But the final meaning of salvation is not only that God loves us but that we also love God in return. If, from this side of death, we seem to be flawed lovers, and if the condition called heaven involves the perfection of love, how can we possibly bridge that distance?

If we are not quite ready for heaven at the time of death, neither do we seem to be evil ogres. If, theologically, we cannot get the masses of mediocre Christians into heaven, is it really possible that all these millions over the ages wind up in hell with Satan and his minions for all eternity? Clearly St. Augustine felt something of this dilemma. He reflects on his own mother’s death in these terms, and he speaks frequently about the cleansing suffering that awaits those who die without being adequately purified in this life. Augustine was much concerned with the moral significance of human life and with the moral continuity between this life and the next. Because of this continuity, he could envision a process of cleansing on both sides of death. He argues that it is better to be cleansed in this life than the next, for the cleansing process in the next life will be far more severe than anything experienced in this life. This was at the heart of his answer to those who felt that purgatory could too easily become an excuse for moral laxity.

Cyprian of Carthage sensed the same dilemma when he was confronted with the problem of basically good people who had failed the test of heroic martyrdom in the time of persecution. Cyprian was clear and unambiguous about the heavenly destiny of heroic martyrs who were victims of the persecution. He was equally clear on the definitive character of hell. His problem had to do with the fate of the well-intended Christians who had weakened under persecution. What was one to think of them? Were such basically good people to be consigned forever to hell? This was a pastoral problem for Cyprian, as it might be for any thoughtful person with deep Christian convictions.

The idea of a process of purification not only in this life but in the next as well seemed to Cyprian a welcome way out of an otherwise uncomfortable dilemma. We could argue that, with Cyprian, the central insight of what eventually became the doctrine of purgatory was formulated already by the middle of the third century. And the impulse of this insight had an interesting effect on other issues. As long as there was only heaven or hell, it was not surprising that hell would be heavily populated. But when the possibility of a purification after death entered the scene, with it

came the tendency to depopulate hell by placing many people in a sort of outer court of heaven until they were more fully prepared for entrance into the presence of God.

We can now see how the idea of an interim state for some people could be thought of as a temporary process of purgative suffering. But we are not yet at the full concept of purgatory as known in the Roman Catholic tradition. Another factor in the process that led to the concept of purgatory was the conviction that the living might in some way have an influence on the dead. This point involves an understanding of a human solidarity that transcends the limits of death. That is, from a Christian perspective, the human person is not only an individual but a deeply social being as well. And, in Roman Catholic theology, “grace does not destroy, but builds on and perfects nature.” Thus if we are social beings by nature and therefore essentially relational, this fact is not left behind in the area of grace. There is a deep sense in which each of us enters into the lives of others, both in terms of love and grace and in terms of hatred and destruction. The traditional formulae of “original sin” and the “communion of saints” express this sense of solidarity both in evil and in grace.

When this sense of human solidarity and interrelatedness is extended to the area of eschatology, it leads us to ponder the possibility that our solidarity with others in both sin and grace is not limited by death. In fact, if the imperative of Christian love is taken with eschatological seriousness, then it amounts to a summons to love even beyond death. Is it not this basic conviction that comes to expression in the ancient Christian practice of praying for the dead, without which such prayer would be little more than meaningless superstition?

With this, we have some of the central concerns that coalesce in the Roman Catholic concept of a purgatory. Purgatory, as Roman Catholic theology envisions it, involves a process of purification after death for those who need it. It is a process in which the concern of the living for the dead, expressed through prayers and charitable works, may have a beneficial effect on the healing of the dead.

Now, it is clearly possible to say all of this without having a particular place in mind. That is, the language of purgation used in Christian tradition seems first to refer to a process rather than to a specific place. This leads us to our final factor, namely, the concept of a “place” in which this purification is accomplished. In his brilliant study of the history of purgatory, Jacques Le Goff argues that it was first in the late twelfth century that the clear reference to purgatory as a place is found in Christian literature. If this argument is correct, it means that even though many intimations of a purifying process may be found in the early centuries of Christian history, the tendency to think of purgatory as a particular place on the eschatological map was a product of the Middle Ages. And even when purgatory was associated with a special place, it is interesting that this place was not necessarily “extra-terrestrial” but could be thought of as somewhere on this planet.

In summary, the notion of a purgatory is intimately related to the conviction that our eternal destiny is irrevocably decided at the moment of our death and that, ultimately, our eternal destiny can be only heaven or hell. But not everyone seems “bad enough” to be consigned to an eternal hell. And most do not seem “good enough” to be candidates for heaven. Therefore, something has to happen “in between.” But this cannot mean a coming back to this life and getting another chance since our destiny is decided at the moment of our death. Therefore, some sort of a cleansing process is postulated between death and the entrance into heaven.

A contemporary Roman Catholic theologian, Cardinal Ratzinger, formulates the concept of purgatory in the following way. Purgatory, he writes, means that there is some unresolved guilt in the person who has died. Hence there is a suffering which continues to radiate because of this guilt.

In this sense, purgatory means “suffering to the end what one has left behind on earth—in the certainty of being accepted, yet having to bear the burden of the withdrawn presence of the Beloved.” This is not unlike the view presented by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*: the souls in purgatory are those of people who were basically animated by the love of God, but whose lives at other levels were marred by blemishes.

Thus the question of purgatory is not simply the notion of an interim state. This has existed in the past and exists at the present time independently of any notion of purgatory. The Roman Catholic view adds to the concept of an interim state the possibility of real purgation after death while in that interim state, and the possibility of being aided by those who still live on earth.

PURGATION IN OTHER TRADITIONS

So far I have argued that while there are symbols of purification in religious systems other than Christianity, the specific doctrine concerning a place of purgation as it is known in the West has come to be associated with the Roman Catholic form of Christianity. In the discussion of the “logic” of this concept, I have mentioned the disparity between the creature and God. Other religious systems, of course, feel a similar disparity or distance between human beings and God. They also attempt to bridge that distance in a way similar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory.

One form of the purifying process in some non-Christian religions is the idea of reincarnation. Because of the distance between where the individual is at the end of life and the final goal of the process of life, the idea of some sort of return to history is used to fill the gap. This return can take place once or many times until the gap has been bridged. While Christians have at times been tempted by the idea of reincarnation, the theory has never become an accepted Christian position. This is probably because it is hard to relate such an idea to the biblical and theological conviction that there is a true finality about death.

Among the forms of reincarnation suggested by Christians, perhaps the most famous comes from the third-century theologian Origen. He argued that at the end of history, the unity of creation would be restored under the rule of God. To him this seemed to be the simple requirement of the goodness of God. In the end, all the enemies of Christ would be overcome, not by being annihilated but by being won over by the divine love. This meant that those who had not made the grade during their first life would return until they had succeeded. Thus the purgative process postulated by Origen is oriented to a theology of universal salvation. In the end, Origen says, there is only “heaven.” Even what Christians have called “hell” is seen as a temporary situation that is superseded by a total restoration of all reality to its God-intended form.

Other early Eastern Christian writers envisioned a form of process after death. In the early third century, for example, Clement of Alexandria taught that souls would endure some sort of remedial “fire,” a fire that was understood in a metaphorical sense. The whole vision of Clement was cast in the framework of an understanding of Christian life that saw grace as an increasing God-likeness in the just. Patristic authors commonly used the term “divinization” to express this understanding of grace. It is, of course, the action of God that makes such a process of divinization possible. But Clement envisioned a growing God-likeness, beginning in this life and continuing in the next, until the soul had reached that state of maturity appropriate to its place in the heavenly mansions.

An outstanding expression of the view of the Eastern Fathers is found in Gregory of Nyssa, who writes of the way in which God draws the human person into the divine presence. It is the reality of sin and guilt in the person that makes the divine attraction itself painful. The soul suffers

not because God takes pleasure in suffering but because the pain is intrinsic to the encounter between the holy love of God and the still imperfect human being. The intensity of this pain will be proportionate to that evil that remains in the person.

Thus, while the Eastern Christian writers envisioned the possibility of something taking place between death and the full entrance into the presence of God, unlike Western authors, they did not see this as a punitive process of suffering. Rather, they were inclined to think of it as a process of education, maturation, and growth. They therefore used a different set of metaphors than those that became common in the West. Together with this, the Eastern church has maintained a strong sense of the communion of all Christians, whether living or dead, and has valued prayers for the dead. But Eastern theologians have not seen these concerns as sufficient evidence to hold a purgatory as it came to be thought of in the West.

IS PURGATORY SCRIPTURAL?

Whether the doctrine of purgatory can be defended as having any basis in Scripture will depend on how one approaches the Bible and understands revelation. These two issues are closely related to one's understanding of the role of the church in relation to the Bible and revelation. Therefore, it is necessary to say something about these three issues: revelation, the biblical text, and church tradition.

The history of Christianity indicates that there have always been different ways of approaching the Bible. There has always been great reverence for the text of the Scriptures in Christian communities. But for centuries, beginning with the great Fathers of the Christian tradition, it was felt that the religious meaning of the biblical texts did not lie on the surface. The great events and personalities of biblical history were quite real for the patristic church. But the religious significance of these persons and events and therefore the "revealed message" was sought through a process known as "spiritual interpretation." This process involved a good deal of allegorizing and other techniques of interpretation. This means that texts that were perceived at one level to deal with real historical realities were read at another level in terms of a more symbolic meaning. Thus, while the early Christian writers were convinced that there was a "literal meaning" of the Bible, the real message of revelation was thought to lie at a deeper level of reflection and interpretation. Simply put, the text of Scripture is not in any sense a verbal message from God. The message of revelation is opened to the reader by the operation of the Spirit and not directly by the text of the Bible.

A similar distinction between revelation and biblical text is found today among Christians who accept the basic insights of historical criticism. The texts of Scripture have a long and complex history, and the divine message of revelation is found not in a specific verbal formulation but in a cluster of religious insights that have their own distinctive history. It is from these central insights, derived from the history of the Jewish and Christian people, that Christians come to understand their relation to God and gain insight into his ways of dealing with humanity. The revelation of God is the emergence of this particular form of religious insight. The Scriptures give witness to this revelatory process throughout its historical development. So while the Scriptures remain the privileged and irreplaceable literary point of contact with the basic experiences that lie at the foundation of historic Christianity, there is no specific literary or verbal formula that may simply be identified with the revealed message of God.

From here, the step to tradition becomes clear. In Roman Catholic thought, Christians never deal solely with the text of Scripture. There is also a history of acceptance and interpretation of

that text, for no text is self-interpreting. Thus, while there may be profound and divinely inspired insights into God's ways of dealing with humanity at the core of the biblical tradition, the possibility that the Christian community would not grasp the full implications of those insights from the beginning is quite understandable. As the community of faith grew, it reflected on the central events of its history in relation to its ongoing experience. So the possibility of tradition as a growth of understanding and insight into the meaning of the original revelation had to be taken into account.

Now, if the original divine revelation cannot be identified simply with a specific biblical formulation, it should not be surprising to discover that Christian history gives rise to new expressions of faith for which there is no univocal or "literal" warrant in Scripture. The process of testing new formulations in the light of the original revelation and the biblical texts is a necessary and difficult one. But it has long been the conviction of the Roman Catholic church that Christians must reckon with the possibility that not everything was said in the Bible and that new and important insights—and therefore new formulas—may legitimately emerge later in Christian history. This is one aspect of the problem of "tradition." But tradition is not a second source of doctrine next to and independent of the Bible. Rather, it is the living communication of the biblical revelation in ever-changing circumstances and in new and different communities and cultures. Just as the texts of Scripture give witness to the divine revelation, so also does the reality of tradition give witness to the same revelation, but in circumstances unknown to the authors of Scripture.

These ideas must be kept in mind when approaching the doctrine of purgatory. Martin Luther, as we know, claimed that this doctrine had no foundation in the Scriptures. This became a matter of concern for the Council of Trent in its attempt to deal with the issues of the Reformation, and it remains an issue among many Protestant exegetes and theologians today.

Is there a scriptural basis for this doctrine? The Council of Trent maintained that there was, and this conviction has remained in Catholic theology down to the present time. But I must point out that the bishops and theologians at the Council of Trent would have read the Scriptures with the mindset of late medieval people. What warrant they might have seen there for the doctrine would be quite different from that discerned by those contemporary theologians who view the Scriptures through the glass of historical criticism. So we shall discuss the scriptural issue with two perspectives in mind. How would the question have appeared to an earlier generation? And how does it appear today? Is there some basis in the Scriptures for the doctrine of purgatory, or is there not? If we are looking for clear and unambiguous statements of the doctrine, we will look in vain. But our reflections on the matter of tradition and development might suggest a reformulation of the question. We might better ask if anything in Scripture initiated the development that eventually led to the doctrine of purgatory. Or, what is it in the biblical material that generates this form of Christian tradition?

One of the obvious texts in the history of this doctrine is 2 Maccabees 12:41–46, a book which dates back to the second century B.C. In this text some soldiers of Judas Maccabeus had been killed in battle and then were discovered to be wearing pagan amulets. This was a violation of Torah and therefore a serious matter. Judas took up a collection from among his surviving soldiers and sent it to Jerusalem to provide what the text calls an "expiatory sacrifice." This action was motivated by what the author calls a "holy and pious thought." And the final verse of the chapter reads: "Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin."

For the participants at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, this book was part of the biblical canon. It is not surprising that theologians who acknowledged the book's canonical status could see a fairly clear warrant for the idea that good deeds of the living might benefit the dead,

and that the dead might be freed of some lesser sins and of some effects of sin even after death. As we have seen, these are basic elements in the doctrine of purgatory. True, the full doctrine of purgatory is not found here, but several crucial elements are. Because of this, Roman Catholic theological handbooks for centuries appealed to 2 Maccabees to show the relation between the church's doctrine and the Scriptures. This all assumes the canonicity of the book. But Maccabees is not included in the Protestant canon, nor is it accepted as a part of the Jewish Bible. Recognizing the problem of canonicity, what might theologians say about such a text at the present time?

Among Roman Catholic exegetes today, the text is seen as evidence for the existence of a tradition of piety which is at least intertestamental and apparently served as the basis for what later became the Christian practice of praying for the dead and performing good works, with the expectation that this might be of some help to the dead. Since the text seems to be more concerned with helping the fallen soldiers to participate in the resurrection of the dead, it is not a direct statement of the later doctrine of purgatory. But like the doctrine of purgatory, it does express some conviction that there are relationships among humans that are not limited by death. This form of piety has strong roots in the long-standing Jewish sense of solidarity, and it is not unreasonable to assume that it later gave rise to the Christian practice of praying for the dead. None of this would have any meaning unless somehow it were possible for God to remit sin in ways not envisioned in our ordinary institutional understandings.

The issue, then, is not whether there is a verbal formulation of the doctrine of purgatory in the Old Testament. It is rather a question of how this sense of piety finds its roots in the Old Testament revelatory process and how, in fact, it develops into a specifically Christian form of understanding concerning the interim condition of the dead. Beyond this, there is no other Old Testament text that stands out clearly in the development of Christian purgatorial doctrine. We turn now to the question of the Christian Scriptures.

In the New Testament, an important text is found in Matthew 12:31–32:

And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

One could ask what meaning this text could have if it were not possible that some sins could be forgiven in the next world. This, in fact, seems to be the understanding of Augustine and of Gregory the Great.¹³ Likewise, it is the understanding of various medieval popes and councils. This text, therefore, has been seen to provide at least some biblical warrant for the concept of purgatory.

The tendency among exegetes today is to see Matthew 12:31–32 as having little if anything to do with purgatory. Rather, it is understood to refer to the decisive seriousness of one's relation to Jesus who is seen as the Spirit-filled messenger of God. To reject Jesus, who is animated by the Spirit of God, is equivalent to rejecting God. Without indulging us in arcane information about the other world, the text gives an eschatological weight to the rejection of Jesus by saying that such an attitude is a sin that simply cannot be forgiven anywhere at all.

A third important text is 1 Corinthians 3:11–15. Paul is describing the possibility that one person might build a life on the foundation of Jesus Christ while others might build their life on gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw. The deeper quality of life may not be apparent in ordinary daily observations, but in the end it will be made known. There will be a "Day" on which the quality of each life will be revealed "with fire." And "fire will test the quality of each

man's work." In speaking about the "fire of judgment" the text ends with the remark: "he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."

If we take the "Day" to refer to the final judgment, then the text seems to speak of a "fire" after the particular judgment that is involved in individual death. Though it is not necessary to interpret this text to mean the fire of purgatory, it was common among the Latin Fathers to understand this fire as a reference to some sort of transient, purificatory punishment prior to the final salvation. Examples of this interpretation can be found in Augustine and Caesar of Arles.¹⁵ At the present, however, it is common among exegetes to see the "Day" and the "flame" as referring to the final judgment. If that is the case, the text provides no significant basis for the doctrine of purgatory. That is, the "fire" spoken of in this text is not seen as the traditional "fire of purgatory," but rather the "fire of judgment" itself.

In conclusion, we might say that for Christians of earlier generations, it was not difficult to find some basis in Scripture for the doctrine of purgatory, even though each particular text might be subjected to different interpretations. For contemporary readers of the Bible, the actual texts of the Scriptures offer less clear evidence of purgatory than does the history of patristic exegesis. As the time between the resurrection of Christ and the return of Christ at the Last Day became longer and longer, the problem of an interim state between individual death and general resurrection became more acute. But the Scriptures give no clear understanding of how that interim state is to be understood. What does seem clear is that Christians, from the earliest generations, prayed for the dead and believed that such prayer could be of some benefit for them. While these are elements of the later doctrine of purgatory, we are still a long way from the full-blown doctrine as it later came to be known.

Thus Roman Catholic exegetes and theologians at the present time would be inclined to say that although there is no clear textual basis in Scripture for the later doctrine of purgatory, neither is there anything that is clearly contrary to that doctrine. In this they differ from those Protestant theologians who hold not only that the doctrine of purgatory has no scriptural basis but that, in fact, it is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture. Frequently cited in favor of the Protestant position are: Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:21; Hebrews 9:27–28; and Revelation 22:11. Perhaps Ephesians 2:8–9 says it most clearly: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

A careful reading of these texts reveals that what is at stake here is not the formulations of particular texts of the Bible that unambiguously reject the concept of purgatory. Rather, in each instance, the underlying issue is the Protestant understanding of justification and the classical Protestant problem with a works-theology. The point, then, is not whether Scripture makes the doctrine of purgatory impossible, but whether these passages must lead to the rejection of purgatory when they are interpreted from the perspective of Reformation theology. This latter seems to be the case. But what if the same passages are read from the perspective of a different theology of grace and justification? This, in fact, is what happens when Roman Catholic theologians search the Scriptures for evidence for or against purgatory. Each of these passages can be read in the context of a Roman Catholic theology of grace. What is really at issue, then, is not whether in the light of Scripture purgatory is possible or impossible, but whether the Reformation theology of justification provides the only appropriate optical instrument for interpreting the Scriptures.

If Roman Catholic theologians find the evidence of Scripture ambiguous, what follows after that is unavoidably a matter of tradition and the development of church doctrine. And a genuine form of purgatorial understanding was developed rather early in the patristic church. The

development came not only from Christian sources, but also from some interaction between Jewish and Christian traditions. The central issue at the core of the development was the sense that some of the dead are in a condition of suffering and can be helped by the prayers of the living. Already at the end of the second century, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* expressed clearly the conviction that Perpetua's prayers for her dead brother had a cleansing and refreshing effect on him. As the specifically Christian development unfolded, it flowed not only from the reading of Scripture but also from the development of the sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacrament of penance in the early church. There is evidence of prayer for the dead already in the second century. And the practice of remembering the dead in the context of the Eucharist existed already in the third century. Eventually, by the third and fourth centuries, there is abundant evidence attesting to celebrating the Eucharist for the benefit of the dead.

HOW THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY DEVELOPED

With the problem of development we hit on another area of difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. In its classical formulation, Reformation theology appealed to "Scripture alone." The Roman Catholic understanding embraced in a self-conscious way both the Scriptures and the principle of tradition. For Roman Catholic theology there was not only a sacred text but also a history of acceptance and understanding of the Scriptures. Its classical formulation was the appeal to "both Scripture and tradition."

The issue of Scripture's sufficiency and the Bible's relation to later Christian history has become a self-conscious question since the time of the Reformation. While the Protestant viewpoint looks for a pure form of doctrine at the beginning of Christian history and sees any deviation from that pure form as a corruption, the Catholic viewpoint sees the beginning more like a seed planted in history. It is the nature of a seed to grow and develop. But the nature of that development as a dimension of the church became the object of considerable theological discussion.

In the course of that discussion, it was never envisioned that the Christian church could be independent of the Bible in its faith life; the Bible was seen as indispensable. Yet it seemed clear to Catholic theology that factors other than the Bible entered into the changing shape of the church over the centuries. Various attempts to explain the difference between the original forms of church life and the present reality of the church have been suggested. The question became particularly important in the nineteenth century. From that time onward, Catholic theologians have been inclined to think of the church as a community that grows through history like a living organism. The idea of a seed and the plant emerging from the seed became common metaphors to express this sense of growth. Like a seed, the revelation of God (and the church formed around that revelation) germinates in the ground of history and of human cultures and gives rise to a plant. While this plant is intrinsically related to the seed, it still looks quite different from the original seed, just as an oak tree looks very different from the acorn from which it grew. In fact, it looks different enough that at any point in history it would be impossible to say that the development would have necessarily had to take this specific form. In terms of doctrine, this has come to mean that, while the Scriptures have a normative and irreplaceable role to play in the faith life of the church, nevertheless, we ought not to expect any one-to-one relationship between the formulations of the Scriptures and the later formulations of church doctrines.

So for Roman Catholic theology, it is not surprising that we cannot find a clear textual "proof" of the doctrine of purgatory in the Scriptures. But we are inclined to ask whether there are issues

that lie at the heart of the biblical revelation that find a form of legitimate expression in this doctrine. One way or the other, the issue of purgatory is clearly an issue of development of doctrine.

But what sort of development? One fact is clear: The doctrine of purgatory was not the invention of theologians. On the contrary, long before theologians became involved, individual Christians prayed for the dead, as I have said above. And in this practice, they were convinced their prayers benefited the dead. In this sense, the question of purgatory can be said to have emerged from the “voice of the people.” This insight lies at the core of Le Goff’s historical study mentioned earlier, where he concludes that the roots of purgatorial doctrine are found not in some theological theory but in the concrete practice of the faithful. This practice was eventually given official approval by the hierarchy and “purged” of what theologians felt were excessively superstitious elements. As this happened, it became possible to relate the purgatorial belief to the developing Roman understanding of indulgences, a factor that became important during the Reformation. Le Goff’s argument offers a helpful way of moving through a very complex history. It also raises some interesting questions about the way in which the reality of faith is carried in the Christian community. In this particular instance, at least, the Christian faithful at large play a decisive role in the process.

Another point of Le Goff’s argument revolves around the fact that one can think of a “purgation” without saying anything about a place in which that purgation is to be carried out. Thus there is a movement from a vaguely defined sense of purgation to the specific place where that process occurs. With this, the geography of the “other world” is expanded from the two-level vision of heaven and hell to a three-level vision which includes an intermediate place between heaven and hell. According to Le Goff, Christians had spoken about purgation from the earliest generations of Christian history, but the idea that purgatory was a specific place emerged with clarity only at the end of the twelfth century.

Perhaps the most elaborate expression of the late medieval vision is found in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante. The meaning of “other world” is not necessarily a place outside this created cosmos. To this famous poet, the place of purgation is located on the earth beneath the “starry firmament.” It is a mountain in an uninhabited place of the southern hemisphere, directly opposite Jerusalem. In Dante’s view, the symbolism of purgation is that of the “climb up the mountain.” The point of purgation is the “progress” of the soul that becomes purer with each step of its ascent.

If we go back to our original question about the nature of this development, we can summarize Le Goff’s view by saying that the development seems to have begun at the level of popular piety and to have moved eventually to official recognition and theological elaboration. Secondly, it seems to have been a movement from symbolism of purgation to the idea of a specific place in which this purgation was carried out. Therefore, for Le Goff the development represents an expansion of the Christian imagination concerning the ultimate relations between God and creation.

CONFRONTATION WITH EASTERN CHRISTIANITY AND WITH THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION IN THE WEST

Even though details of Le Goff’s argument may be challenged, the fact remains that the clearest official expressions of the Roman understanding of purgatory are found in a confrontation of the Roman authorities with the Eastern church in the medieval period and with the Reformers of the West in the sixteenth century. In both cases there is little doubt that issues of ecclesiastical power

and politics played a significant role in the proceedings. It was out of this context that the official Catholic teaching emerged. By official teaching, I refer to positions taken in the most solemn manner by the Roman Catholic hierarchical teaching office. The official teaching, therefore, is distinct from the speculations of systematic theologians, and in this case is much more limited than the popular understandings of purgatory suggest. The official teaching on purgatory is found in statements made by solemn assemblies of bishops and theologians recognized at least by Roman Catholics as ecumenical councils. In response to the Eastern church, the Second Council of Lyons (1274) and the Council of Florence (1439) addressed the issue. The Council of Trent (1563) did the same in response to the Protestant Reformation.

The point of difference between Rome and the Eastern church is not the same as that between Rome and the Protestant Reformers of the West. The Eastern church, in the aftermath of the Origenist controversy and the rejection of Origen's theory of universal restoration, held to a view summarized well by John Chrysostom. According to this view, there was indeed an intermediate state for everyone between death and general resurrection. All were situated at various levels of happiness or unhappiness, each in relation to the level of sanctification achieved on earth. The "communion of saints" meant that the saints in happiness could be of help to the faithful still on earth, and the faithful on earth could—through prayer and good works—bring some aid to the souls situated at some level of unhappiness. But the unhappiness was not understood to include atonement or purifying fire. We might envision it more in terms of a process of maturation than as some sort of judicial or penal process. Thus, while the Greeks rejected the idea of punishment or atonement after death, they did not reject the idea that the living could come to the aid of the dead by prayers, works, and above all, by offering the Eucharist for their benefit.

For the sixteenth-century Reformers in the West, however, the issue was quite different. Such pious practices—shared by the East and the West until this time—were seen by Protestant Reformers as a failure to take seriously the sufficiency of Christ's redemptive work. Hence the Reformers objected strenuously to the practice of offering Mass for the benefit of the dead and to the Roman practice concerning indulgences. While the issue of money was involved in both cases, the problem was not simply that. Far more basic was the issue of works in the context of justification and grace. The problem of the Reformation did not begin with the rejection of the Roman Catholic theology of purgatory. But in a sense, the issue of purgatory emerged as the point around which other more basic problems coalesced. These were problems about the relation of the purgatorial doctrine to the Scriptures, the role of the Pope in the remission of sin, and, above all, the sovereign freedom of God in all things pertaining to grace and justification. Luther and other Reformers seemed to think that the doctrine of purgatory would obscure the grace and redemptive work of Jesus.

The conciliar teaching on purgatory is very concise. The Council of Lyons stated that those who die in charity and are truly sorry for their sins, but before they have made complete satisfaction for their wrongdoings, will be purged after death by "cathartic punishments." The council showed considerable restraint by avoiding any reference to purgatory as a particular place, even though the idea had existed for about a century by this time. The Council of Florence added nothing substantial to the teaching of Lyons. This council is interesting more for the discussions of ecclesiological problems and issues of method than for any advance in the theology of purgatory.

The teaching of the Council of Trent, like that of Lyons, is brief. Trent reduces its teaching on purgatory to two points. First, purgation exists for some between death and the general resurrection, and second, the souls undergoing such purgation can be aided by the prayers and good works of the faithful and especially by the sacrifice of the Mass. Beyond this, nothing is said

about the location of purgatory or the nature of the “fire.” The Council does not even say clearly that purgatory is a place, though its teaching is commonly understood to mean that. And the Council takes the occasion to encourage the bishops to eliminate all superstitious understandings and practices from their communities. Church leaders should take measures to avoid “things that pander to a certain kind of curiosity and superstition or savor of filthy lucre.”

To this extent, the Council of Trent recognized what it saw as the legitimate concern of the Reformers and tried to initiate action against the aberrations which the Reformers decried. But it never conceded the fundamental soteriological doctrine of the Reformers. Insofar as this involves a different understanding of the relation between God and humanity, between grace and freedom, and between faith and works, the issue remains for ecumenical relations even today. The most basic issue in the entire discussion, in my view, is not the existence or nonexistence of purgatory, for that question is symptomatic of a much deeper issue. At root, the ecumenical problem is a question of different soteriological perceptions. To this I now turn my attention.

PURGATION AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF GRACE AND JUSTIFICATION

As we have seen, the concept of purgatory does not stand alone as a theological idea. Rather, it is part of a larger scenario that reflects the Roman Catholic understanding of how God deals with us and how we are to respond to God in the context of grace and eschatological fulfillment. The problem with purgatory might be seen as an eschatological extension of the Roman Catholic understanding of grace and works. How do human works play into the theology of grace? Do works in any way put God under obligation to us? In what sense can we speak of the freedom of God with respect to grace and how does this relate to our sense of human freedom and responsibility? If there is a problem concerning works already in the understanding of this life, it is not surprising to see the same problem in the eschatological concept of purgatory. I shall now offer some reflections on what this looks like from a Roman Catholic perspective, for in the final analysis, this issue lies at the center of the historical rejection of purgatory from Reformation theology.

One of the crucial convictions of Christianity, whether in its Protestant or Roman Catholic form, is the mystery of God’s limitless love, forgiveness, and acceptance. For Christian theology, it is the creative power of God’s love that brought forth the created universe, conferring on it the very gift of existence. It is the same mystery of God’s creative love that brings the potential of created being to fulfillment in eschatological completion. And it is that forgiving, merciful love that reaches to us through the historical mediation of Jesus Christ. For Roman Catholic theology, this has long meant that the language of grace does not begin with the doctrine of redemption. It begins already, at least in an analogous way, with the doctrine of creation. For existence itself is a free and unmerited gift from the creative love of God. Salvation, then, is the realization of the full potential of human existence in that sort of relation to God which is possible for us only because God makes our freedom possible and crowns the act of our freedom with the transforming power of the divine presence in human life. In such a context, Christ is seen to be the supreme realization of that potential to receive God into human life and hence to find final fulfillment. It is to this mystery of Christ that Christians look to discover the deepest meaning of grace and salvation.

Roman Catholic theology understands our created existence to be but the beginning of a process that comes to complete fruition through a life of response to the continuing offer of God’s gracious presence in human life. We are, so to say, enveloped by grace. Grace is the first word

(creation), and grace is the final word (the fulfillment of creation with God). Grace is with us always, calling us out of a fallen, self-centered existence to an existence in love, sustaining us in our halting efforts to respond generously to God, and crowning our efforts with the rich gift of God's self-communication. Truly, God is the first and the final word.

For Roman Catholic theology, God's gracious action is first of all an offer. As such, it is intended to initiate a dialogue with God's free creatures. But that offer does not "come home" unless it is received and responded to by the human person. Grace makes our human response possible. But grace does not do what only we can do, namely, offer an appropriate human response to the mystery of God's love. As Augustine writes: "His mercy comes before us in everything. But to assent to or dissent from the call of God is a matter for one's own will." And in one of his sermons Augustine says: "He who created you without your help does not justify you without your help."²¹

Thus Roman Catholic theology recognizes the possibility that God's offer of grace might be rejected and that the offer might be truly "inefficacious." The doctrine of justification in its Roman Catholic form, then, does not involve a denial of God's gracious initiative, nor of Christ's crucial, mediatorial role in salvation. Neither does the doctrine of purgatory. But both of these doctrines involve a fundamental recognition of the moral significance of human choices in working out the divine plan of salvation. Both these doctrines express the conviction that without a human response, God's initiative remains inefficacious and that God never overrides or suppresses human freedom.

Now, our response to God's grace during our life on earth may be basically good, but it is far from perfect. Here we touch on another difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. This difference provides a helpful basis for seeing that there is a genuine form of "both just and sinner" in the Roman Catholic understanding of justification and grace. For Roman Catholic theology, however, this polarity of grace and sin is internal to the human person. Roman Catholic theology thinks of grace as involving a real transformation of the human person in and through its response to God's presence. This is the issue involved in the Roman Catholic tendency to talk about "created grace" and about an increase of grace. The impact of God's gracious presence does not remain "outside" the human person, but touches the very roots of our personal existence. We become different than we were—but not instantly. We become different through a process of transformation spread over a lifetime. The Roman Catholic theology of justification and grace has stronger ties with the Eastern patristic understanding of "divinization" than with the Reformation understanding of "forensic justification."

For Roman Catholic theology, then, the issue of works-theology is not a question of placing God under obligation to us, nor is it a question of producing grace by means of human works. What is really involved here is the conviction that the gift of God to the human creature really changes the creature internally to the degree that the creature is open and responsive to that gift. The issue of "merit" from good works, then, does not mean that we receive something extrinsic to the work itself. We receive nothing other than the very self-gift of God. And in the reception of that gift, we are profoundly changed. What we "get," then, is the intrinsic effect of God's presence on the human person. If we were to think of the relationship between God and the human person as analogous to a relationship of love between two persons, we could say simply that we are changed profoundly in the power of God's presence. And there are two dimensions to this change: the first is the experience of love itself. In a very deep sense, love is its own "reward." The second dimension is that one who has been loved and has loved in return becomes capable of loving more deeply. This is the heart of the matter that Roman Catholic theology commonly expresses in the

metaphorical language of “merit.” Unfortunately, that metaphor is frequently understood as a reward extrinsic to the very relation of love which grace involves. Language about works and merit, then, begins to sound like an otherworldly bank transaction and becomes problematic not only for Protestant thought but for Roman Catholic thought as well.

We might summarize the Roman Catholic view by saying that human freedom and human response to God must have a place in the final understanding of justification and grace. Unless we attempt to name that place appropriately, the affirmation of grace would turn human beings into automatons. We have not said enough about justification if we speak only of the power of God’s gracious action on our behalf. While grace and justification are the free and unmerited offer of God (and in this sense are “from God alone”), yet God’s offer is not successful unless it calls forth an appropriate human response. While grace makes the free human response possible, God does not force or take away human freedom and responsibility. The Roman Catholic understanding of grace and freedom sounds more like a dialogue—certainly not a dialogue between equals, but a true dialogue nonetheless—while the Protestant understanding, at least to Roman Catholic ears, sounds like a divine monologue. The Protestant problem with purgatory, it seems to me, does not begin in the afterlife. It begins already in this life, in the doctrine of justification and grace.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to provide some insight into the broader eschatological context for the concept of purgatory, a sense of the inner logic of this theological position, and at least some awareness of the sources from which this doctrine evolved. It remains to indicate where it stands on the theological map of contemporary Roman Catholicism.

As Le Goff has argued, the historical development of purgatory was, at least in part, a movement from symbolism about purgation to the imaginative creation of a place in which this purgation would take place. Contemporary Roman Catholic experience seems to be well along the way in the reversal of that process. While many Roman Catholics reflect very little change in their understanding of purgatory and of the practices associated with it, recent decades show a remarkably large vacuum in the case of many other Roman Catholics. The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has not changed on the major points affirmed by the councils mentioned above, but the practice of many Roman Catholics and the reflection of many theologians have shifted significantly.

Not knowing what to do with this “place” in the other world, contemporary theologians tend to situate a process of purification within the experience of death itself. Death is, in much of contemporary Roman Catholic thought, the moment of our final decision for or against God. And that which “purges” us is not some external thing, but the very mystery of the holy God. If we are flawed lovers during life, how will we respond to God’s summons in the ambiguous darkness of death? Will our death be a hardening in sin leading to hell? Or will it be a final opening to the mystery of God’s love coming to us from beyond death? Or will the layers of selfishness we have built up in this life make it painful for us to “let go” and finally to entrust ourselves to the embrace of God’s love and mercy in the darkness of death?

Purgatorial theology envisions the latter as a real possibility. This modern tendency among Roman Catholic theologians has a stronger affinity with the theology of the Eastern church than with the medieval extravagances of the West, but it is clarified now through contemporary explorations into the experience of human death. In this context, purgation is seen as a symbol of

the full maturation of a person's decisive choice for God and of the full integration of that choice into all the dimensions of that person's being.

This might seem to heighten the significance of individual eschatology excessively. But it is commonly placed in a context that recognizes how deeply each individual life is embedded in a network of relationships. While our personal history is decisively finished at death, each of us leaves behind a network of failures and painful experiences that enter into the lives of others.

Is it possible to see this as an intimation in our contemporary experience of what was traditionally pointed to with the symbol of the communion of saints? Our personal lives are decisively ended with death, but we may not yet have integrated the fundamental option of our lives into all the dimensions of our own personal being. Much less have we succeeded in healing the impact that our lives have had on others. According to a thought-provoking essay by Robert Schreier, the core issue that lies behind the tradition might be seen as the basic human need to deal with the consequences of our lives, both for ourselves and for others. For those who are convinced that there is an abiding issue behind the history of this doctrine, this is a title that aptly describes the present situation in Roman Catholic thought.⁷



⁷ Hayes, Z. J. (1996). [The Purgatorial View](#). In S. N. Gundry & W. Crockett (Eds.), *Four Views on Hell* (pp. 89–118). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

**Finishing
Viewed
Position**

**MODIFYING THE
FIRES OF HELL!**



Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

PROponents FRAME A DEFENSE & MAP THEIR MINORITY POSITION ALONG THESE PARAMETERS:

- Our Origin & Our Goal The Same – Restored Relationship, Complete Communion, & Eternal Existence With Our Maker.
- During The Interim Period – The Dead In Christ Sleep – While --
- Purgatory: The State, Place, Condition Of Wakeful & Purifying Suffering In That Next World - Between Heaven & Hell – Is For Most Others.
- Purgation Bridges Distance Between Human Beings - Created “Less Than God” - Thus By Their Behavior - “Guilty Before God” - The One Perfect As Creator.
- This View Sees The Fires Of Hell As Of Two Types – Of Ante-Room -- Purifying & In Deepest Dark – Punishing.
- This Purifying Period & Condition Comes To An End For Each Individual Once Their Personal Guilt Of Sin Is Separately Expiated - Only Then Are They Redeemed To That Intended Place & Space Of Bliss & Of Grace.

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

PROponents FRAME A DEFENSE & MAP THEIR MINORITY POSITION ALONG THESE PARAMETERS:

- Purgatory Continues In Eschatological Existence Until The Last & Final Judgment.
- Ancient Jewish Theology Conceived Of “Shades” That Existed In Those Conditions Considered Neither Good Nor Bad – But Rather – In Diminished State & Capacity.
- The First Christian Writers Of Apology Never Addressed Either This Idea Or Issue – The Early Emphasis Was Only On Getting The Gospel Message Out; An Obedient Response To The Gospel Was The All-Inclusive Answer By Way Of The Primitive Church To Any Unresolved Personal Problems & Stains Of Guilt.
- Come The 3rd Century, According To Several Observers – At Their Deaths - Many If Not Most - Christians Were Unprepared – With Layers Of Self & Sin Remaining – In Desperate Necessity Of Finishing Touches To “Close The Gap”; It Could Be Said: They Were Rightly Identified In Their Loyalties – They Were Ranked Correct In Their Love Relations - They Were Positive In The Course Of Their Lives – Typical However - They Simply Had Unfinished Business.

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

PROPONENTS FRAME A DEFENSE & MAP THEIR MINORITY POSITION ALONG THESE PARAMETERS:

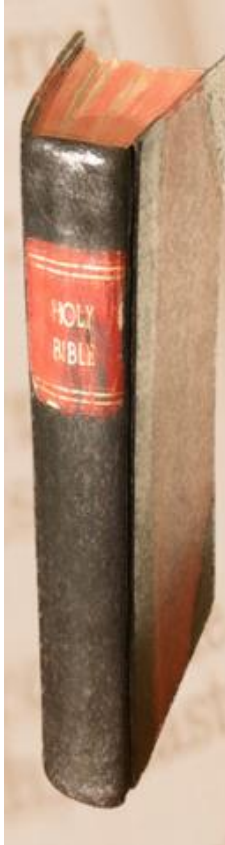
- The Church Father Origen Admitted As Much. Because There Were So Many In These Unfortunate Circumstances – He Felt That The Body Of Christ Was Entering Eternity Incomplete. In Other Words, The Bride Could Not Be Presented & Would Have To Be Made Ready While History Runs Its Course.
- The Church Father Cyprian Was Faced Similar Dilemma When He Was Confronted With The Problem Of Good People Who Had Failed The Test Of Heroic Martyrdom In The Time Of Persecution; He Handled This Pastoral Crisis Thru The Suggestion That Heaven Had An Outer Court & Those Basically Good Got Placed There Waiting Until They Were More Fully Prepared For Entrance Into The Presence Of God.
- The Church Father Clement Began To Teach That Most Souls Would Have To Endure Some Sort Of Fiery Remediation As Part Of The Divinization Process (Sanctification) That Continues Beyond The Grave Until An Appropriate Spiritual Maturity Has Been Reached. (Eastern Church Taught As - *Maturing Purgation – Continuing Education.*)

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

PROPONENTS FRAME A DEFENSE & MAP THEIR MINORITY POSITION ALONG THESE PARAMETERS:

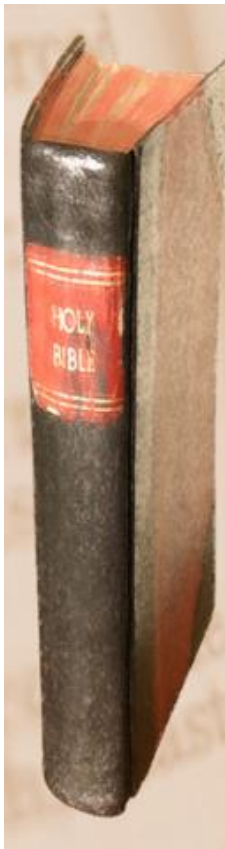
- Purgatory Of Folklore Was Purposed As A Place For Assessing & Adjusting Accounts; Sick Souls Are Scrupulously Evaluated, Skillfully Diagnosed, & Surgically Reconditioned By The Great Physician.
- In The Development Of A Theology Of Purgatory By Both Process & Place – In Its Movement From Scholarly Debate Unto Status As An Official Doctrine Of The Medieval Church - Augustine Of Hippo Was Instrumental.
- St. Augustine Added To This Conceptual Development Of Purgatory As A Process & A Place – A Third “P” – “Prayer” - In Intercession For The Dead!
- Because Augustine Relied On Texts Drawn From The Deuterocanonical Books Known As The Apocrypha – Authorized & Included In Catholic Versions Only – The Concept Of Purgatory Seems Scripturally Foreign To Most Protestants & Not Seriously Considered.



Spiritual Formation Renovare' Bible's Second Canon Inclusion Rationale

1. **The Deuterocanonical books were part of the ancient Greek Bible, the Septuagint, which was in circulation during the time of Christ. It was the Bible of the early Church. This Bible shaped the conscious awareness of God for the first Christians.**
2. **The Deuterocanonical books help Christian readers understand the New Testament context – the context of Jesus' ministry as well as of the writers of the New Testament books. The people Jesus encountered and taught were in many ways spiritually formed by these writings.**
3. **Most of the Church throughout most of her history has included the Deuterocanonical books as part of the Bible. The Eastern Orthodox Bible, the Greek Bible, the Slavonic Bible, the Anglican Bible, and the Roman Catholic Bible all currently include the Deuterocanonical books. Plus, while not viewing them as Scripture, early Protestant Bibles – Luther's translation, the Great Bible of 1539, the Geneva Bible of 1560 (supported by John Calvin and John Knox), the Bishop's Bible of 1568, and the King James Bible of 1611 – included the Deuterocanonical books, or 'Apocrypha,' as something of an appendix.**

www.PowerpointBackgrounds.com



Spiritual Formation Renovare' Bible's Second Canon Inclusion Rationale

4. **Throughout the ages, many questions have persisted about the value of the Deuterocanonical books. Even those groups in our time who include and use the Deuterocanonals do not give them the same authority as the primary canon. And we, the General Editors of *The Renovare' Spiritual Formation Bible*, would not want to accord these books the same authority as revealed scripture. Still, their role in bridging the gap between Malachi and Matthew is unquestioned and they provide marvelous insight into the way in which the first Christians understood their relationship to God.**
5. **The Deuterocanonical books do not affect any central doctrine of the Christian faith, but they do contain many helpful insights for spiritual formation. For this reason alone they are worth reading and can function for us today in much the same way that good sermons and devotional writings do. Of them, the reformer Martin Luther wrote, 'Apocrypha – that is, books which are not regarded as equal to the holy Scriptures, and yet are profitable and good to read.' For this purpose, we have organized the Deuterocanonical books into three categories: Law & History, Writings & Wisdom, and Prophets & Apocalyptic.**

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

PROONENTS FRAME A DEFENSE & MAP THEIR MINORITY POSITION ALONG THESE PARAMETERS:

- The Doctrine Developed Recognizing The Desire Of Those Living For Continuity Rather Than Closure After The Funeral; It Recognized How Deeply Each Individual Life Is Embedded In A Network Of Relationships Even After Death; It Also Dealt Well With The Basic Human Need To Cope With The Lasting Consequences Of Our Lives.
- Augustine’s Main Text Was 2nd Maccabees 12: 41 – 46, Which Was Written 200 Years Before Christ. In This Text We Read Where Some Of Judas Maccabeus’ Soldiers Had Been Wearing Pagan Amulets While Fighting In Battle & Were Killed – An Obvious Violation Of The Old Law. This Moved Judas To Take Donations For “Expiatory Sacrifice” – “An Atonement For The Dead That They Might Be Freed From This Sin.”
- Catholic Defenders Of This Three-Tier Doctrine Cite 1st Corinthians 3: 11 – 15 As An Illustration Showing That Such A Place Of Purgation Is Not Necessarily A Concept Contrary To The Common Bible Recognized By Both Broad Religious Divisions.

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

PROONENTS FRAME A DEFENSE & MAP THEIR MINORITY POSITION ALONG THESE PARAMETERS:

- Referencing Church History, This Third Tier - As An Idea & Issue – Became Basic As A Problem For The Church – In The Reform Conflict - Pivot Point – & In The Protracted Debate Concerning - Grace & Justification – Focal Point.
- The Doctrine Of Purgatory Can Be Seen As An Eschatological Extension Of The Roman Catholic Understanding Of Grace Versus Works. The Doctrine Of Purgatory Can Be Seen As An Eschatological Extension Of The Roman Catholic Understanding Of The Character Transforming Process Of “Created Grace” – Responding To God’s Love Over A Lifetime.
- Post-Reformation, Conciliar Teaching On Purgatory Became Precise; The Council Of Lyons Stated That Those Who Die In Charity & Are Truly Sorry For Their Sins, But Before They Have Made Complete Satisfaction For Their Wrongdoings, Will Be Purged After Death By – “Cathartic Punishments.”

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

- The Doctrine Of Purgatory Can Be Seen As An Eschatological Extension Of The Roman Catholic Understanding Of Godliness Or Christlikeness; Transitioning From Wholeness To Holiness - God Does Not Make Us Similar Without Our Willing It – Rather As His Will Works Together With Our Own. Holiness Is Possible Because God’s Grace Has Given Space For Our Cooperation & In Church Doctrine That Space After Death Is Called Purgatory.
- The Doctrine Of Purgatory Can Be Seen As An Eschatological Extension Of The Roman Catholic Understanding Of God’s Creative Love; The Language Of Grace Does Not Begin With The Redemptive Doctrine But With The Doctrine Of Creation – Our Very Existence Being Free & Unmerited Gift!

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

From Intro: *Theology Of Purgatory*, Ombres, O. P.

- “And as we are to deal with Purgatory, the search is made more difficult by centuries of bitter controversy often along confessional lines. It soon becomes evident that Purgatory is a test case for revealing much larger concatenations of beliefs, practices, ideologies. With only some exaggeration, it could be said that to ask a Christian what he understands by Purgatory is the quickest way to discover what he believes concerning eschatology and life after death, the relationship of Scripture to Tradition, the nature of the Church, sin and its forgiveness, prayer...”

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

From Intro: *Theology Of Purgatory*, Ombres, O. P.

“According to the criterion of the ‘hierarchy of truths’ we have to show how any single truth is connected to other truths & in particular to the central truths. It is suggested that in this case Purgatory is to be related to the more fundamental, comprehensive doctrine of our participation in the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the establishing of a new creation.”

BUT THE SORROWS OF HELL



ARE NOT GODLY SORROW

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

THE OFFICIAL OPPOSITION TO THIS CATHOLIC VIEWPOINT STATES:

- Purgatory Is Product Of The Period Of Alchemic Assumptions – Specifically Those Concepts Concerning The Turning Of Lead To Gold By Removing Layers Of Impurity
- Purgatory Is Based Upon The Allegorical School Of Interpretation @ Alexandria, Egypt. This Methodology Of Hermeneutically Interpreting Everything Allegorical Defeats All Major Areas Of Theology Including Eschatology; Furthermore, The Purgative Process Postulated Was Oriented To A Theology Of Universal Salvation.
- Purgatory As A Place Or As A Process Depends On Apocryphal Writings. Utilization Of Second Maccabees As Their Major Proof Text Is Tacit Admission By Adherents That The Canon Bible Of Itself Does Not Have Any Clear Teaching On This Subject.
- Purgatory As Doctrine Depends On “Revelation” Given {Or As Latter Invention Of} To The Roman Church In The Middle Ages. Appealing To The Authority Of The Church – Especially Of That Time – Does Not Provide Credibility. Moreover, This Is Another Tacit Admission That The Inspired Word Of God By Itself Does Not Teach Purgatory.

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God’s Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation**

THE OFFICIAL OPPOSITION TO THIS CATHOLIC VIEWPOINT STATES:

- The Purgatory Doctrine Assumes An Inaccurate Definition Of The Love Of God Bestowed In Grace; Although Infinite, The Love Of God Is Limited In Its Application To Those Accepting His Son As Savior. Even The Almighty In All His Majesty - Gracious & Merciful – Cannot Forgive One Rejecting In The Role Of Our Savior - His Only Son Jesus Christ.
- It Is Implied His Grace Is Not Sufficient For Each Situation – Doubtful For Those Masses Dying In Imperfect Condition & Unprepared Circumstances - That Tailored & Personal Retribution Provides For Individual Differences; True That If Perfection Is Required None Are Safe – Nobody Can Be Saved; However, It Is False That There Can Be Anyone Saved If Atonement Of The Cross Was Not Sufficiently Efficacious. {Read Romans Chapters 5 & 8}

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God's Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation

THE OFFICIAL OPPOSITION TO THIS CATHOLIC VIEWPOINT STATES:

- *Bottom Line:* The Concept Of Purgatory Presents Death As A Step – But Not The Final Step – In The Soul's Ascent To God. As Death Claims Souls, Our God Comes To Them & Gives Them Another Opportunity To Respond To His Grace. This Opportunity Is The Extended Period Of Time We Commonly Call Purgatory. No Matter How These Souls Respond, Their Situations Remain, For Them, Better Or Worse, Incomplete Until The Coming of the Lord.
- *Bottom Line:* The Concept Of Purgatory Is Indefensible According To Bible Scripture – It Discounts The Decisiveness Of Our Decisions While On Earth; The Bible Teaches That We Make These Fundamental Choices With Forever Consequences On This Side Of The Grave. As An Ensample We Can Read In Hebrews Chapter 9: 27, 28 – “And it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment. So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many...”

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Purgationist Perspective

- This View Affirms – A Derived 2nd Order Concept - Consistent With God's Attributes Of Character & Harmonious With Divine Applications Of Principle – As Fact A - Transition Tier Of Pained Preparation

- *Bottom Line:* Even If, The Concept Of Purgatory Is Framed Such That It Cannot Be Called Universalism - Because Our God Does Not Exercise Coercive Or Sovereign Grace To Save People Against The Will – Because Hell Remains The Final Destiny Of Impenitent Sinners Along With Those Active Minions Of Satan – Eventual & Ultimate For The Vast Majority Of The Human Race - They Find Their Final Home In Heaven;
- *Bottom Line:* Although, Hell Exists As Logical & Necessary Implication Of Creature Freedom - Practically Speaking - It Is Not Considered A Concern Of Consequence For Average Persons – Its Reality As Permanent Experience Is Only Of Remote Possibility; In Addition - The Purgatory Doctrine - In Its Official Status - Is Similarly Ungrounded According To Holy Writ Because Of Its Projected - Although Protracted – Generalism. i.e. Matthew 7: 14, etc.
- *Bottom Line:* Even Though - The Official Doctrine Of Purgatory - Allows For The Few – Final Destiny In Place Called Hell - It Is Then Only In The Descriptive Dimension Of Simple Spiritual Separation From God & The Good; In Summation - If The Doctrine Of Purgatory Is Not Totally Together On Our Subject – It Is Not True - Nor Defensible!

A Look At Roman Catholicism: Purgatory: Does It Exist?

Greg Litmer
Cincinnati, Ohio

In this lesson, we are going to study the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. I suppose that for most of you, the idea of Purgatory is a hazy one, something that you have heard about but are not quite sure what it is. The Catholic dictionary defines Purgatory in the following manner: "The place and state in which souls suffer for a while and are purged after death, before they go to heaven, on account of their sins. Venial sins, which have never in life been remitted, must be purged away after death, by some pain of sense, inflicted probably by material fire. It is of faith that those in Purgatory can be helped by the prayers and sacrifices of the faithful on earth and especially by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar (Mass, in other words)." You notice in that statement the use of the word "venial" sins. In order to get an understanding of what is actually supposed to be taking place in Purgatory, we need to define what is meant by a "venial" sin.

According to Catholicism, there are two kinds of what they call "actual sins." We are going to give just a brief definition because we will be dealing with this in another lesson. The first type of sin is called a "mortal" sin. The Baltimore Catechism defines it as being a grievous offense against the law of God. A "venial" sin is a less serious offense against the law of God. If you have committed a mortal sin and have not confessed it to the priest and gained absolution, when you die, you go to hell. If you have a venial sin that you have not repented of or confessed, when you die, you will go to Purgatory.

SIN

Mortal Venial

1. Grievous 1. Less Serious
2. Condemns to hell 2. Sends to purgatory

So when we discuss the doctrine of Purgatory, what we are talking about is a place or state of being, that exists after death, separate and apart from heaven or hell, where a person who has died with unrepented of venial sins will go and be purged of those sins by a real, physical punishment, and then be fit to enter into heaven. A most important part of this doctrine is that those who are in Purgatory can be helped by those who are still alive on earth by prayer and by having special masses said for them. In this way, the length of their time of punishment will be shortened.

In the book, *The Faith of Our Father*, James Cardinal Gibbons teaches the doctrine of Purgatory. In there, he says that it is "clearly taught in the Old Testament" and that it is "insinuated in the New Testament." Our purpose

will be to examine the proof texts that are used to teach the doctrine of Purgatory and see whether or not that is what they actually teach.

The only passage from the Old Testament that is cited in an attempt to prove the doctrine of Purgatory is from 2 Maccabees 12:43-46. This is one of the Apocryphal books, meaning of doubtful origin. These books were not accepted as inspired by the Jews and belonging in the Old Testament; they were not accepted by the early Christians; and they are not included in the Canon of the Bible accepted today by all non-Catholics. If the doctrine of Purgatory is clearly taught in the Old Testament as the Catholics claim, isn't it strange that it is limited to a book which lacks canonical authority and was not accepted by the Jews as being inspired? That passage says,

"And making a gathering, He sent 12,000 drachmas of silver to Jerusalem for sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead, thinking well and religiously concerning the resurrection. (For if he had not hoped that they that were slain should rise again, it would have seemed superfluous and vain to pray for the dead.) And because he considered that they who had fallen asleep with godliness had great grace laid up for them. It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins."

The "he" that is spoken of here is Judas Maccabees. In the story of the book of Maccabees, those people who had died and were being prayed for here were guilty of the sin of idolatry, a mortal sin according to Catholicism, one that condemns people to hell. Catholics contend that Purgatory is for those who have committed venial sins. Therefore, their Old Testament proof depends upon a book that does not belong in the Old Testament to begin with, and the very passage that is quoted contradicts their own teaching about mortal sin when it is used to defend Purgatory. Furthermore, try as I might to find it, 2 Maccabees 12:43-46 does not mention Purgatory.

Let's move into the New Testament. Matthew 12:31, 32 is said to infer the existence of Purgatory. There the Bible says,

"Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him: but neither in this world, neither in the world to come."

According to James Cardinal Gibbons, once again, the words of Jesus "leaves us to infer that there are some sins which will be pardoned in the life to come." He goes on to say, "Now in the next life, sins cannot be forgiven in heaven, for nothing defiled can enter there; nor can they be forgiven in hell, for out of hell there is no redemption. They must, therefore, be pardoned in the intermediate state of Purgatory."

I agree that no sin can enter into heaven and that once in hell that is where you will stay. But to say that there will be no forgiveness for a sin in this world nor in the world to come in no way implies that some sins will be forgiven in the world to come. That is reading something into this passage that simply is not there. What it really shows is that that sin is totally without forgiveness, now and forever. It is showing the seriousness of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The parallel passage in Mark 3:29 makes it clearer. There we read, "But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation."

The world to come that is spoken of in Matthew 12 refers to the age when men will have eternal life. I think that Luke 20:34, 35 brings this out very well. It is the time following the resurrection and the judgment. The Catholics do not believe that Purgatory will exist after the judgment. Therefore, even if Matthew 12 taught that there would be future forgiveness of sins after one had died, which it does not, that passage could not be referring to Purgatory because according to their own position, Purgatory will not be in existence at that time.

Now turn to 1 Cor. 3:13-15. This is another popular text for Catholic support of the theory of Purgatory. There Paul writes,

"Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so far as by fire."

Brethren, this is an important passage in the defense of Purgatory, and I would like for us- to reread it carefully. But this time, let's begin with verse 11. There we read,

"For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."

Now let us notice a few things about that passage. First, the apostle Paul is speaking about a man's work being tried or tested. He is not talking about a man's soul being purged or purified. Second, every man's work is to be tested, but according to the Catholics, every man does not go to Purgatory. Third, Purgatory is nowhere mentioned or implied in that passage. The apostle is teaching that all of us build upon the one foundation, which is Christ, when we spread the Gospel and seek to build the church. The people who are converted are going to be of different types; some will be as wood,

hay, or stubble which will be burned up when the going gets rough; others will be like precious stones, silver or gold which will be able to withstand the trials.

Now if we lose our work, or our converts turn out to be like the wood and hay and stubble, certainly we shall suffer loss, but we ourselves can still be saved. If our work abides (in other words, those that we have been instrumental in helping to convert), then we will have the reward of the joy of seeing those people remain true to the Lord. It is possible, however, that the fruit of our labors may perish without it necessarily being our fault. A whole lot depends on the types of people that the converts are, and that is what Paul is talking about.

The next passage is kind of hard to understand. It was used in a Knights of Columbus ad campaign a number of years ago to offer proof of Purgatory. The passage is 2 Tim. 1:18. Let's look also at verses 16, 17 so that we will get a better understanding of what is being talked about. There we read, "The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain: But, when he was in Rome, he sought me out very diligently, and found me. The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day: and in how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well."

The ad stated that "Paul himself observed the custom of praying for the dead: 'The Lord grant unto him to find mercy of the Lord in that day' Would Paul have prayed for Onesiphorus, then dead, if he believed the soul of his departed co-worker was beyond help?" The reason this is hard to understand is that the whole argument revolves around whether or not Onesiphorus was dead. The Bible does not give us one reason to believe that he was dead. What is happening is that Catholics are assuming the very thing that they need to prove. Paul simply says, "The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day." Now this could be the day he dies or it could be the day of judgment, try as you might, you simply cannot find the slightest hint of Purgatory in that passage.

Brethren, there are other aspects of the doctrine of Purgatory that I believe should be mentioned. I have known a large number of people who have spent their hard-earned money to have Masses said for the souls of their departed loved ones whom they have been convinced are languishing in Purgatory. Remember, by praying and having special Masses said for these dead people, Catholics on earth are supposed to be able to shorten their time of punishment. Now, in case the full impact of what this means has not hit you yet, consider this letter which was sent out years ago by the Vincentian Seminary Auxiliary of St. Louis.

"Can you afford to forget your friends and relatives whom God has called away into eternity? This would be a sign of disloyalty and a poor indication of

your love for dear ones. Perhaps the soul of your departed relatives is still in Purgatory. You loved them in life; you should not forget them in death. They cry to you; 'Have pity on me, at least you, my friend, for the hand of the Lord has touched me.' You can answer this plea by enrolling your beloved deceased in the Vincentian Seminary Auxiliary Purgatorial Novenas of Masses - All Saints Day. Remember too, your offering will aid in the educating of our young men preparing for the priesthood of Christ. Your charity will please the Divine Master very much and He will reward you abundantly for He cannot be outdone in charity. Write the names of your beloved deceased on the enclosed sheet and mail it to me."

Do you see what has happened? By using this approach, the doctrine of Purgatory has become one of the most lucrative doctrines ever thought up by man. Poor hard working people are being told that they should have Masses said to get their dead loved ones relieved from suffering (Pay to pray, in other words). Lest anyone think that I am exaggerating about the tremendous amounts of money that have been generated by this doctrine, study the history of the sale of indulgences by the Catholic church down through the ages.

Friends & brethren, the Bible does picture an intermediate state between death and the judgment, but it does not give any hope of forgiveness for the wicked in that state. When we die, our fate is sealed. A reading of the account of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16 helps us to understand this. The Bible says, "It is appointed unto man once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). The only time to get forgiveness for our sins is in this life. Even though the thought of Purgatory may seem pleasing and even plausible to the human mind, it is nothing but a false hope that is not supported in any way by the Word of God.

Now, lest any claim that Purgatory can be justified by human tradition, that it is a natural instinct to pray for the dead and therefore, there must be something to it, I have also heard people attempt to justify fornication on the basis of natural instinct. Our rule of faith must be God's Word, not tradition or instinct. And God's Word does not teach the existence of Purgatory.

Truth Magazine XXIV: 32, pp. 522-524
August 14, 1980

THE CONDITIONAL VIEW

Clark H. Pinnock

THE NATURE OF HELL

The cover story of *US News and World Report* for March 25, 1991, read as follows: “Hell’s Sober Comeback. Three out of five Americans now believe in Hades but their views on damnation differ sharply. Theologians are struggling to explain these infernal images.” The journalist observed that more people today are taking the reality of hell seriously than in recent years, though they continue to be uncertain about hell’s nature; thus a debate around the issue has arisen in the churches. I can identify with that observation. For me too, hell is an unquestioned reality, plainly announced in the biblical witness, but its precise *nature* is problematic.

Of all the articles of theology that have troubled the human conscience over the centuries, I suppose few have caused any greater anxiety than the received interpretation of hell as everlasting conscious punishment in body and soul, an anxiety which is heightened only by the cluster of other dark notions that cling to it in the tradition: I refer to beliefs such as double predestination, the fewness of salvation, and the idea that the plight of the damned brings delight to the saints who behold it from heaven’s glory. Even though the focus here is on the nature of hell as everlasting punishment—and there is no space to refute the ideas associated with it, however deserving of refutation—it would be a mistake not to point to the larger pattern to which the traditional view of hell belongs and which accentuates the horror. According to the larger picture, we are asked to believe that God endlessly tortures sinners by the million, sinners who perish because the Father has decided not to elect them to salvation, though he could have done so, and whose torments are supposed to gladden the hearts of believers in heaven. The problems with this doctrine are both extensive and profound.

Not surprisingly, the traditional view of the nature of hell has been a stumbling block for believers and an effective weapon in the hands of skeptics for use against the faith. The situation has become so serious that one scarcely hears hell mentioned at all today, even from pulpits committed to the traditional view. This fact demonstrates that its defenders are not enthusiastic about it, even though the doctrine remains on the books. The Westminster Confession, for example, states that the non-elect “shall be cast into eternal torments and be punished with everlasting destruction” (33.2). Even when an individual does have the stomach to defend the doctrine, there is seldom the delight or pleasure in it as earlier generations had and never any mention of predestination in the presentation. The doctrine once in full flower is drooping.

The purpose of this chapter is to give the rationale for an alternate interpretation of the nature of hell. It is no denial of the reality of hell or the fact that the finally impenitent wicked will suffer in it, but only a questioning of the traditional theory about its nature. I will argue that it is more scriptural, theologically coherent, and practical to interpret the nature of hell as the destruction rather than the endless torture of the wicked. I will maintain that the ultimate result of rejecting God is self-destruction, closure with God, and absolute death in body, soul, and spirit. I take the verse seriously that says: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). This view does not portray God as being a vindictive and sadistic punisher. Hell is the possibility that human beings may choose in their freedom and thus break relations with God. God loves these persons and does not choose death for them, but hell is nevertheless a possibility arising out of their sin and obduracy.

Hell is not the beginning of a new immortal life in torment but the end of a life of rebellion. Hell is, as C. S. Lewis said, the “outer rim where being fades away into nonentity.”

It is conceivable that the position I am advancing on the nature of hell is most adequate not only in terms of exegesis and theological, rational coherence, as I hope to prove, but also better in its potential actually to preserve the doctrine of hell for Christian eschatology. For, given the silence attending the traditional view today even among its supporters, the whole idea of hell may be about to disappear unless a better interpretation can be offered about its nature. It seems to me that for many believers today, faced with a choice between hell as everlasting conscious punishment and universal salvation, will choose universalism. What I offer them is a third possibility and another choice. I will try to prove that understanding hell as final destruction proves superior to both the traditional view and its current rival in every way.

HELL IN THE TRADITION

To engage any theological topic, one joins an ongoing conversation. Therefore, as background to a presentation of my own view of the nature of hell, it is appropriate to conduct a brief review of the standard interpretation in the tradition. Not incidentally, I want to be sure my readers are aware of the full horror of the view I am proposing to revise.

There was no single Jewish view of hell. Many sources present the destruction of the wicked (e.g., Wisd. Sol. 4:18–19; 5:14–15), while others speak of everlasting conscious torment (e.g., 1 Enoch 27:1–3). There is a similar diversity in the early Christian sources. The Apostles’ Creed affirms that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead at the end of history, though it does not spell out the exact nature of that judgment. One can find the idea of everlasting torment (in Tertullian), annihilation (in the *Didache*), and universalism (in Origen).

The diversity was not to last, however. The view of hell as everlasting physical and mental torture came to dominate orthodox thinking early on. Hell as a place of severe torment amidst material flaming fire was to achieve quasi-official status in several texts: for example, “If anyone says that the punishment of devils and wicked men is temporary and will eventually cease, let him be anathema” (Constantinople, A.D. 543). The wicked may expect “perpetual punishment” (The Fourth Lateran, 1215). “If anyone dies unrepentant in the state of mortal sin, he will undoubtedly be tormented forever in the fires of an everlasting hell” (Pope Innocent IV, 1224). And, “If anyone says that the punishments of the damned in hell will not last forever, let him be anathema” (Vatican I, 1870). Such views were immortalized by the poet Dante in *The Inferno*, including the notion that the saints in glory will derive pleasure from contemplating the torments of the damned. Delight in the pains of the lost, though reprehensible to us today, is a logical extension of the doctrine, because (if true) hell would magnify God’s justice and provide a vivid contrast with the bliss of heaven.

Augustine taught us to view hell as a condition of endless conscious torment in body and soul. In his *The City of God* (Book 21), he defends this view and argues at length against all objections to the notion. In answer to one objection, he muses over how a resurrected body could bum physically and suffer psychologically forever without being materially consumed or losing consciousness. He saw a problem—how could the wicked suffer the sort of bums one would sustain on earth from close contact with raging flames and not be consumed by them? To explain this marvel, Augustine assures us that God has the power to do miracles which transcend ordinary nature and that he will employ this power to keep sinners alive and conscious in the fire. One

must suppose that an ancient reader was moved by Augustine's theological acumen, but I doubt that many today are able to receive his remarks.

Nevertheless, the power of Augustine's vision is overwhelming and has dominated the Christian imagination for over a millennium. The Protestant theologian Jonathan Edwards is no less rigorous in his doctrine of hell. His famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," paints the image of God dangling sinners over the flames like so many loathsome spiders. "O sinner, you hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and bum it asunder." Edwards played on human fear to bring souls to God. John Gerstner, a scholar of Edwards, nicely summarizes his view, which he shares:

Hell is a spiritual and material furnace of fire where its victims are exquisitely tortured in their minds and in their bodies eternally, according to their various capacities, by God, the devils, and damned humans including themselves, in their memories and consciences as well as in their raging, unsatisfied lusts, from which place of death God's saving grace, mercy, and pity are gone forever, never for a moment to return.

So it is not only God's pleasure to torture the wicked everlastingly, but it will be the happiness of the saints to see and know that this is being faithfully done. Reading Edwards gives one the impression of people watching a cat trapped in a microwave squirm in agony, while taking delight in it. Thus will the saints in heaven, according to Edwards, consider the torments of the damned with pleasure and satisfaction.

DIFFICULTIES WITH THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

Obviously there are difficulties with this doctrine large enough to encourage theologians to consider revising it. Just ask yourself: How can one reconcile this doctrine with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ? Is he not a God of boundless mercy? How then can we project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness? Torturing people without end is not the sort of thing the "Abba" Father of Jesus would do. Would God who tells us to love our enemies be intending to wreak vengeance on his enemies for all eternity? Hans Küng poses a hard question: "What would we think of a human being who satisfied his thirst for revenge so implacably and insatiably?"

But there are so many other problems. What does this tradition do to the moral goodness of God? Torturing people forever is an action easier to associate with Satan than with God, measured by ordinary moral standards and/or by the gospel. And what human crimes could possibly deserve everlasting conscious torture? The traditional view of hell is a very disturbing concept that needs reconsideration.

In a recent book defending the traditional view of the nature of hell, Robert Morey complains that in every generation people keep questioning the orthodox belief in everlasting conscious torment, even though the basis for it has been laid out time and again in books like his. The explanation for this is simple: Given the cruelty attributed to God by the traditional doctrine, it is inevitable that sensitive Christians would always wonder if the doctrine is true.

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF HELL

Because of the severe problems that attach to the traditional view, it is natural for alternative interpretations to be proposed. These represent fresh attempts to understand the scriptural data,

new paradigms of the nature of hell that need to be tested. This very book is a discussion between viable and influential alternative models for understanding hell.

Metaphor. The most modest revision (and for that reason, the most attractive possibility for those who honor tradition highly) involves reconsidering the nature of the unending pains of hell, taking them in a metaphorical sense. Jean-Paul Sartre shows us how to do this in his play *No Exit*. He asks us to imagine hell as a shabby hotel where three sinners are forever tied to one another in a vicious circle and where each mentally torments, and is tormented by, the others. There is no need for red-hot pokers or burning sulphur because “hell is other people.” This is most appealing because it sounds like the traditional view but without any physical suffering, only the intrinsic pain and remorse of a life lived for one’s self. For Blamires, “It is only necessary to picture reliving devoid of penitence to guess what the human lot in hell must be like.”

This position signifies, in traditional language, that there is the pain of loss but not the pain of sense, the fire being metaphorical. It is a version that sounds traditional without being sadistic or vindictive and hence does not run into the objections mentioned. Augustine and Edwards, of course, would have rejected it as involving softening concessions. They would ask, “Why do you suppose that the fire is not material and will not bum? Are we not raised in body and soul so as to feel its heat?” And, I would add, what is gained if the torment is equally grievous as they insist? If mental suffering is as grievous as physical, how does this help us? It is not the traditional view, but it is no improvement on it either.

Universalism. A second revision stemming from Origen is more radical, turning hell into a purging and refining fire that finally deposits all its inhabitants in heaven. It would abolish eternal torment completely, making hell into a temporary condition of finite and graded punishments, leading to heaven in the end. The sufferings of the wicked in hell would not be endless but would result in the salvation of everyone (universalism). This is an attractive position because it takes sin seriously, while upholding God’s unqualified victory. It is also an easy position for traditionalists to switch to, because all it really requires them to do is to expand the number of people elected to salvation. This process presents little problem because within Augustinian logic, it has always been possible to imagine God electing everybody to salvation and effecting his will irresistibly the normal way. Followers of Augustine make excellent universalists, once they accept John 3:16 and 1 Timothy 2:4. Lying behind the logic, Berkhof mentions something more personal: “For God’s sake we hope hell will be a form of purification.”¹⁴

There is a slight problem, of course. God may wish to save everybody, but what if someone does not want to be saved? What then? Will God predetermine such a person to love him? That does not make a lot of sense. How can God predestine the free response of love? This is something even God cannot do. All we can say is this: God does not cease to work for the salvation of the world but has to accept the outcome. Hell is proof of how seriously God takes human freedom.

Annihilationism. My own position is a third possibility, called annihilationism or conditional immortality. Being unable to discount the possibility of hell as a final irreversible condition, I am forced to choose between two interpretations of hell: Do the finally impenitent suffer everlasting, conscious punishment (in body and soul, either literally or metaphorically), or do they go out of existence in the second death? In other words, does hellfire torment or consume? I contend that God does not grant immortality to the wicked to inflict endless pain upon them but will allow them finally to perish. E. G. Selwyn writes:

There is little in the NT to suggest a state of everlasting punishment, but much to indicate an ultimate destruction or dissolution of those who cannot enter into life: conditional immortality seems to be the doctrine most consonant with the teaching of Scripture.

I know this is not the traditional view of the nature of hell, but I hope that my readers will be willing to entertain the possibility that the tradition has gone wrong in this matter. It is common for evangelicals to say that Augustine and tradition got other things wrong: e.g., the doctrine of the millennium, the practice of infant baptism, and God's sovereign reprobation of the wicked. It should be possible, then, for my readers to entertain the further possibility (for the sake of argument) that he erred about the nature of hell too. Theology sometimes needs reforming; maybe it needs reforming in the matter that lies before us. I believe it does and invite the reader to consider the possibility as a thought experiment.

HELL AS CLOSURE AND ABSOLUTE DEATH

Biblical Interpretation. Evangelical theology starts with the Bible and asks what the Scriptures have to say about the nature of hell. The Bible enjoys primacy relative to other sources for theology, being our canon and teacher. Whatever it teaches about hell we are obliged to accept. So there is no disagreement on that score between traditionalists and my point of view, even though they often try to make an issue of it. The ritual that they follow will be familiar. Traditionalists solemnly confess that their belief in everlasting hellish torment is a genuinely awful concept which appalls them but go on to add that the view is mandatory because Jesus and the Bible teach it, giving them no choice except to believe it. By admitting its unpleasantness, they hope to prove their unswerving fidelity to the Bible and a certain heroism in their believing such an awful truth just because Scripture teaches it. They make it sound as if the infallibility of the Bible were at stake. But is it really?

Given the peculiar character of eschatological assertions, modesty in interpretation is surely called for. Biblical texts on our future condition, like those on creation, supply little by way of specific information. The Bible is reserved about giving us details to satisfy our curiosity. A hiddenness hangs over the subject. The Scriptures do not reveal the time or nature of end things. Colorful symbolic imagery is used which cannot be translated into literal description. From the threat of hell, we may not be able to derive precise knowledge about its nature, any more than we can grasp the nature of heaven from the promises God gives us regarding it.

Nevertheless, the Bible does leave us a strong general impression in regard to the nature of hell—the impression of final, irreversible destruction, of closure with God. The language and imagery used by Scripture is so powerful in that direction that it is surprising that more theologians have not picked up on it before now. The Bible uses the language of death and destruction, of ruin and perishing, when it speaks of the fate of the impenitent wicked. It uses the imagery of fire that consumes whatever is thrown into it; linking together images of fire and destruction suggests annihilation. One receives the impression that “eternal punishment” refers to a divine judgment whose results cannot be reversed rather than to the experience of endless torment (i.e., eternal punishing). Although there are many good reasons for questioning the traditional view of the nature of hell, the most important reason is the fact that the Bible does not teach it. Contrary to the loud claims of the traditionalists, it is not a biblical doctrine.

It is a little annoying to be told that no biblical case can be made for the annihilation of the wicked when it is the traditional view that most needs proving. Arthur Pink may call the position on hell as destruction an absurdity, William Hendriksen may say that he is aghast that anyone would argue this point, and J. I. Packer may attribute the view to secular sentimentality—but let the reader judge the true situation. The Bible gives a strong impression to any honest reader that

hell denotes final destruction, so the burden of proof rests with those who refuse to believe and accept this teaching.

The Old Testament gives us a clear picture of the end of the wicked in terms of destruction and supplies the basic imagery of divine judgment for the New Testament to use. In Psalm 37, for example, we read that the wicked will fade like the grass and wither like the herb (v. 2), that they will be cut off and be no more (vv. 9–10), that they will perish and vanish like smoke (v. 20), and that they will be altogether destroyed (v. 38). One finds the same imagery in an oracle from the prophet Malachi: “ ‘Surely the day is coming; it will bum like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them’ ” (Mal. 4:1–2). While it is true that the point of reference for these warnings in the Old Testament is this-worldly, the basic imagery overwhelmingly denotes destruction and perishing and sets the tone for the New Testament doctrine.

Turning to the New Testament, Jesus’ teaching about the eternal destiny of the wicked is bold in its warnings but modest when it comes to precise description. Refraining from creating a clear picture of hell, he did not dwell on the act of damnation or on the torments of the damned (unlike the *Apocalypse of Peter*). Jesus’ words on the subject are poised to underline the importance of the decision that needs to be made here and now and not to deal in speculations about the exact nature of heaven and hell. He did not speak of hell in order to convey information about it as a place beyond present human experience and then use that data to press the decision the gospel calls for.

At the same time, Jesus said many things that support the impression that the Old Testament gives of hell as final destruction. Our Lord spoke plainly of God’s judgment as the annihilation of the wicked when he warned about God’s ability to destroy body and soul in hell (Matt. 10:28). He was echoing the terms that John the Baptist had used when he pictured the wicked as dry wood about to be thrown into the fire and chaff about to be burned (Matt. 3:10, 12). Jesus warned that the wicked would be cast into hell (Matt. 5:30), like garbage thrown into *gehenna*—an allusion to the valley outside Jerusalem where sacrifices were once offered to Moloch (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6) and where garbage may have smoldered and burned in Jesus’ day. The wicked would be burned up just like weeds thrown into the fire (Matt. 13:30, 42, 49–50). Thus the impression Jesus leaves us with is a strong one: The impenitent wicked can expect to be destroyed by the wrath of God.

The apostle Paul creates the same impression when he wrote of the everlasting destruction that would come upon unrepentant sinners (2 Thess. 1:9). He warned that the wicked would reap corruption (Gal. 6:8) and stated that God would destroy the wicked (1 Cor. 3:17; Phil. 1:28); he spoke of their fate as a death that they deserved to die (Rom. 1:32), the wages of their sins (6:23). Concerning the wicked, the apostle stated plainly and concisely: “Their destiny is destruction” (Phil. 3:19). In all these verses, Paul made it clear that hell would mean termination.

It is no different in any other New Testament book. Peter spoke of the “destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:7) and of false teachers who denied the Lord, thus bringing upon themselves “swift destruction” (2:1, 3). He said that they would be like the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah that were burned to ashes (2:6), and that they would perish like the ancient world perished in the great Flood (3:6–7). The author of Hebrews likewise referred to the wicked who shrank back and would be destroyed (Heb. 10:39). Jude pointed to Sodom as an analogy to God’s final judgment, being the city that underwent “the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). Similarly, the apocalypse of John speaks both of a lake of fire that will consume the wicked and of the second death (Rev.

20:14–15). Throughout its pages, following the Old Testament lead, the New Testament employs images of death, perishing, destruction, and corruption to describe the end of the wicked.

A fair person would have to conclude from such texts that the Bible can reasonably be read to teach the final destruction of the wicked. It is shocking to be told that there is no basis for thinking in this way. Clearly it has plausibility as an interpretation and integrity as an opinion. It is a natural interpretation of the basic nature of the divine judgment. I sincerely hope that traditionalists will stop saying that there is no biblical basis for this view when there is such a strong basis for it.

Immortality of the Soul. What then might account for the misreading of the Bible represented by the traditional view of hell? What have our teachers not noticed so that hell connotes something other than destruction? What has created the strong conviction that this destruction language cannot mean what it says?

An explanation for this exists in a hellenistic belief about human nature that has dominated Christian thinking about eschatology almost from the beginning. I refer to the belief in the immortality of the soul which, when accepted, must necessarily skew the exegesis. I believe that the real basis of the traditional view of the nature of hell is not the Bible's talk of the wicked perishing but an unbiblical anthropology that is read into the text. If a biblical reader approached the text with the assumption that souls are naturally immortal, would they not be compelled to interpret texts that speak of the wicked being destroyed to mean that they are tortured forever, since according to that presupposition souls cannot go out of existence? Such a belief, when applied to the biblical texts as an interpretative grid, would have to result in a misreading of the data. If souls are naturally immortal, they must necessarily spend a conscious eternity somewhere and, if there is a *gehenna* of fire, they would have to spend it alive in fiery torment. It is this belief in natural immortality rather than biblical texts that drives the traditional view of the nature of hell as everlasting conscious punishment and prevents people reading the Bible literally.

Belief in the immortality of the soul has long attached itself to Christian theology. There has been a virtual consensus that the soul survives death because it is by nature an incorporeal substance. The assumption goes back to Plato's view of the soul as metaphysically indestructible, a view shared by Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. Jacques Maritain states it for us: "The human soul cannot die. Once it exists, it cannot disappear; it will necessarily exist forever and endure without end."²³ This concept has influenced theology for a long, long time, but it is not biblical.

The Bible does not teach the natural immortality of the soul; it points instead to the resurrection of the body as God's gift to believers. God alone has immortality (1 Tim. 6:16) but graciously grants embodied life to his people (1 Cor. 15:21, 50–54; 2 Tim. 1:10). God gives us life and God takes it away. There is nothing in the nature of the human soul that requires it to live forever. The Bible teaches conditionalism: God created humans mortal with a capacity for life everlasting, but it is not their inherent possession. Immortality is a gift God offers us in the gospel, not an inalienable possession. The soul is not an immortal substance that has to be placed somewhere if it rejects God. If a person does reject God finally, there is nothing in biblical anthropology to contradict what Jesus plainly taught—God will destroy the wicked, body and soul, in hell. Once this is seen, a person is free to read the Bible on hell naturally and straightforwardly.

The Greek doctrine of immortality has affected theology unduly on this point—a good example of the occasional hellenization of Christian doctrine. The idea of souls being naturally immortal, however, distorts the interpretation of biblical texts about hell. It virtually requires a person to stretch the experience of destruction into endless conscious torment. Presumably the

traditional view of the nature of hell was originally constructed in the following way: People mixed up their belief in divine judgment after death (which is scriptural) with their belief in the immortality of the soul (which is unscriptural) and concluded (incorrectly) that the nature of hell must be everlasting conscious torment. The logic would be impeccable if only the second premise were not false. Of course, it might be the case that God will still give immortality to the wicked and require them to experience it in everlasting fiery torment. My argument does not rule that out, though it would be a problem explaining why he would choose to do so.

These first two points (the exegesis of Scripture and the unbiblical doctrine of the immortality of all souls) belong together and mutually suggest that the wicked are not going to be tortured forever. The Bible warns against absolute loss in hell and has the anthropological assumption to support that possibility. Orthodoxy needs to straighten out its anthropology.

Morality. The traditional view also runs into deep objections beyond the exegetical. There are moral, judicial, and metaphysical problems to face. Let us begin with the moral problems surrounding the traditional view, which depicts God acting in a way that contradicts his goodness and offends our moral sense.

According to Christian theology the nature of God is revealed in Jesus Christ and shown to be boundlessly merciful. God loves the whole world. His heart is to invite sinners to a festive meal (Matt. 8:11). He is a forgiving and loving Father toward them (Luke 15:11–32), not a cruel and sadistic torturer as the traditional view of hell would suggest. What would the goodness of God mean if God torments people everlastingly? Of course, it is not our place to criticize God, but it is permitted to think about what we are saying. The traditional view of the nature of hell does not cohere well with the character of God disclosed in the gospel; at least, it must make one think twice before concluding that hell spells everlasting conscious punishing.

Our moral intuition agrees with this. There is a powerful moral revulsion against the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell. Everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for his enemies whom he does not even allow to die. How can one love a God like that? I suppose one might be afraid of him, but could we love and respect him? Would we want to strive to be like him in this mercilessness? Surely the idea of everlasting conscious torment raises the problem of evil to impossible heights. Antony Flew was right to object that if Christians really believe that God created people with the full intention of torturing some of them in hell forever, they might as well give up the effort to defend Christianity. In that case, the apologetic task in relation to theodicy would be utterly hopeless. John Stott seems to agree: “I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.”²⁷

Many attempts have been made to hide the problem. Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield, for example, lower the population of hell by means of a postmillennial eschatology and the automatic salvation of babies who die in infancy, concluding that very few persons (relatively speaking) will be going to hell anyway. Why worry if only a negligible number, statistically speaking, are going to be tormented everlastingly? At least some traditionalists are aware of problems here and try to deal with them. Unfortunately, according to these doughty Princetonians, millions still get tortured forever even under their generous scenario. We need something better than that.

Another attempt to get around the moral problem is to redefine the nature of everlasting punishment. C. S. Lewis does this when he pictures hell in *The Great Divorce* as almost pleasant, if a little drab. He transforms the lake of fire into the kind of place from which to take day trips

into heaven and to which to return in order to meet with the theological society in hell on Thursdays. In such renditions, hell may be nasty and inconvenient but certainly no lake of fire.

Though sympathetic with efforts to take the hell out of hell, I find myself agreeing with genuine traditionalists in objecting to the way in which the biblical warnings are emasculated and the moral problem dealt with, by sheer speculation or fancy footwork rather than through any real exegesis. The biblical warnings appear to spell out a terrible destruction awaiting the impenitent wicked; so, if hell is everlasting torment as traditionalists think, they should not try to weasel out of it. Better that people face up to the horror and call for genuine theological renewal on the point.

Morality makes hell a hard topic to discuss calmly. How can anyone with the milk of human kindness in them contemplate the idea dispassionately when the traditional doctrine is so profoundly disturbing? But, if so, are we being driven by subjectivist feelings that we should suppress? James I. Packer says that he objects to the sense of moral superiority he detects in critics of the traditional view and charges they are driven by secular sentimentalism. This is not altogether helpful, however. If secular sentimentality drives saintly John Stott (the person Packer is referring to), what drives Packer? Is it hardheartedness or a thirst for retribution? Enough of that! The real issue here is God's nature and the conscience, not mere human feelings. Is he the God of boundless mercy or one who tortures souls without end?

Any doctrine of hell needs to pass the moral test, and the version I am advancing can do so. An annihilationist does not have to defend everlasting torture, and one oriented to human freedom does not have to deal with divine predestination to hell. According to my view, God is morally justified in destroying the wicked because he respects their human choices. He will not save them if they do not want to be saved. God wills the salvation of all people (2 Peter 3:9) but will fail to save some of them on account of their human freedom. To affirm hell means accepting human significance. Sinners do not have to be saved and will not be forced to go to heaven. They have a moral "right" to hell. The God who seeks our well-being in fellowship with himself will not force his friendship upon anyone. In the end he will allow us to become what we have chosen.

Justice. The principles of justice also pose a serious problem for the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell because it depicts God acting unjustly. Like morality, it raises questions about God's character and offends our sense of natural justice. Hell as annihilation, on the other hand, does not.

Let readers ask themselves what lifestyle, what set of actions, would deserve the ultimate of penalties—everlasting conscious punishment? It is easy to accept that annihilation might be deserved by those whose lives turned in a definitive No to God, but it is hard to accept hell as everlasting conscious torment with no hope of escape or remittance as a just punishment for anything. It is too heavy a sentence and cannot be successfully defended as a just action on God's part. Sending the wicked to everlasting torment would be to treat persons worse than they could deserve.

Consider it on the basis of an Old Testament standard of justice, the standard of strict equivalence: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Exod. 21:24). Did the sinner visit upon God everlasting torment? Did he cause God or his neighbors everlasting pain and loss? Of course not; no human has the power to do such harm. Under the Old Testament standard, no finite set of deeds that individual sinners have done could justify such an infinite sentence. This point stands even without invoking the higher standard from Jesus on this very issue. "You have heard that it was said.... But I tell you" (Matt. 5:38–39). Jesus' followers are called to a higher standard of justice in the name of the Lord God, who himself operates on a higher one. The commandment of Moses limited the vengeance of unlimited retaliation, and Jesus limits it still more. Under

gospel ethics the traditional view of hell is inconceivable. It would amount to inflicting infinite suffering upon those who have committed finite sins and goes far beyond an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It would create a serious disproportion between sins committed in time and the resulting suffering experienced forever.

Anselm tried to argue that our sins are worthy of an infinite punishment because they are committed against an infinite majesty. This may have worked in the Middle Ages, but it will not work as an argument today. We do not accept inequality in judgments on the basis of the honor of the victim, as if stealing from a doctor is worse than stealing from a beggar. The fact that we have sinned against an infinite God does not justify an infinite penalty. No judge today would calibrate the degree of punishment on a scale of the honor of the one who has been wronged. The old arguments for hell as everlasting punishing do not work.

What purpose of God would be served by the unending torture of the wicked except those of vengeance and vindictiveness? Such a fate for the wicked would spell endless and totally unredeemptive suffering. Here would be punishment just for its own sake. Surely God does not act like that. Even the plagues of Egypt were intended to be redemptive for those who would respond to the warning. Unending torment would be utterly pointless, wasted suffering that could never lead to anything good.

My point is that eternal torment serves no purpose at all and exhibits a vindictiveness totally out of keeping with the love of God revealed in the gospel. Hans Küng is right:

Even apart from the image of a truly merciless God that contradicts everything we can assume from what Jesus says of the Father of the lost, can we be surprised at a time when retributive punishments without an opportunity of probation are being increasingly abandoned in education and penal justice, that the idea not only of a lifelong, but even eternal punishment of body and soul, seems to many people absolutely monstrous.

In mentioning penology, Küng draws attention to the fact that the ideal of punitive, retributive justice underlies traditional thinking about the nature of hell. Sinners will have to pay back what is owed to the last farthing and beyond. God is the ultimate harsh judge in this way of thinking. No doubt it is feared that, should sinners not have this stick raised against them, they would not be deterred from committing offenses against God and humanity.

Annihilation, on the other hand, makes better sense of hell in terms of justice. If people refuse God's friendship, it would not be right to visit on them a punishment beyond what was deserved, such as everlasting conscious torture would be. What would be just is not to keep totally corrupt people alive forever. God has no obligation to keep such souls alive. Destruction is the obvious fate for them. As long as we do not hold to the unbiblical doctrine of the immortality of the soul, the extinction and elimination of the wicked is the obviously just solution.

But if so, what about possible degrees of punishment in hell that some texts suggest (Matt. 10:15; Luke 12:47–48)? How could extinction make room for that? I am not exactly sure how to answer that because it requires more detailed knowledge of the precise act of damnation than we have been given. I am sure that it is not beyond God's wisdom to figure about how degrees of punishment might enter into this event. Maybe there will be a period of punishment before oblivion and nonbeing. What there cannot be is what the tradition insists on: excessive punishment.

Metaphysics. A final objection to the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell is cosmological dualism. The doctrine creates a lurking sense of metaphysical disquiet. History ends so badly under the old scenario. In what is supposed to be the victory of Christ, evil and rebellion continue

in hell under conditions of burning and torturing. In what is supposed to be a resolution, heaven and hell go on existing alongside each other forever in everlasting cosmological dualism. The New Testament says that God is going to be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) and that God is going to be making “everything new” (Rev. 21:5), but the new creation turns out flawed from day one. John Stott does not think it adds up right, asking: “How can God in any meaningful sense be called ‘everything to everybody’ while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment?”

What kind of reconciliation and redemption is it if heaven and hell coexist forever, if evil, suffering, and death all continue to have reality? In the new order how can there be still a segment of unrenewed being, i.e., two kingdoms, one belonging to God and the other to Satan, who reigns at least in hell? It just doesn’t sound right. Surely God abolishes all that in the new creation. Surely the biblical picture is that of Jesus completely victorious over sin and death, suffering and Satan, and all those enemies consumed in the lake of fire and second death. Only if evil, death, devils, and the wicked go into oblivion does history issue in unqualified victory. Victory means that evil is removed and nothing remains but light and love. The traditional theory of everlasting torment means that the shadow of darkness hangs over the new creation forever.

Augustine was not troubled by this duality because of the aesthetic motif in his thinking. The parallelism of heaven and hell, of evil and goodness coexisting, contributed to the complex perfection of the whole in his mind. It was a dimension of the divine artistry and much admired by the saints. The bishop wrote:

The unjust will bum to some extent so that all the just in the Lord may see the joys that they receive and in those may look upon the punishments which they have evaded, in order that they may realize the more that they are richer in divine grace unto eternity, the more openly they see that those evils are punished unto eternity which they have overcome by his help.

In Augustine’s view, believers, far from being disturbed by these hellish torments, would experience satisfaction and admiration on account of them. I acknowledge this view but doubt that more than a handful of people today could assent to this cruel aesthetic.

In conclusion, it makes better sense metaphysically to think of the nature of hell as final destruction and of the dwindling out of existence of the wicked, rather than to posit a disloyal opposition existing eternally alongside God in an unredeemed corner of the new creation.

Examination of Proof Texts. We turn now to the proof texts that are appealed to in support of the doctrine of the nature of hell as everlasting conscious torment. There are only a few of them, but they ought to be reviewed. Can they be fairly interpreted along the lines of annihilation? I think one is entitled to expect that.

1. Regarding those cast into *gehenna*, Jesus says: “Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). Some think that this implies everlasting conscious suffering. But it does not imply it if you go back to the imagery of Isaiah 66:24 from which the phrase is drawn. Here the dead bodies of God’s enemies are being eaten by maggots and burned up. The fire and the worm in this figure are destroying the dead bodies, not tormenting conscious persons. By calling the fire unquenchable, the Bible is saying that the fire is not quenched until the job is finished. The tradition misreads this verse when it sees everlasting suffering in it.

2. In a solemn declaration, Jesus says: “They will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life” (Matt. 25:46). I admit that the interpretation of hell as everlasting conscious torment can be found in this verse if one wishes to, especially if the adjective “conscious” is smuggled into the phrase “eternal punishment” (as is common).⁴⁰ But there are

considerations that line up the meaning with the larger body of evidence. In this text, Jesus does not define the nature either of eternal life or of eternal death. He says there will be two destinies and leaves it there. This perspective gives us the freedom to interpret the saying about hell either as everlasting conscious torment (eternal punishing) or as irreversible destruction (eternal punishment). The text allows for both interpretations because it only teaches the finality of the judgment, not its precise nature. Matt. 25:46 is not a proof text for everlasting conscious punishing.

3. What about the text in the famous parable of the six brothers (Luke 16:23–24), in which Jesus describes a rich man (Dives) suffering in hellish torments? Certainly the figure is there in the midst of much contemporary Jewish imagery and folklore. In a classic reversal-of-fortunes parable, the poor man (Lazarus) is carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom (v. 22). But unless there is a lot of room in the patriarch’s lap, the detail seems to be imagery rather than a literal description of what the future life will actually be like. In addition, the story refers to *hades* (the intermediate state between death and resurrection), not to *gehenna* (the final end of the wicked), and is not strictly relevant to our subject. Nevertheless, the passage is regularly and unfairly appealed to in traditionalist literature to describe hell, not the intermediate state. The fact is that we cannot deduce from it what the final end of the wicked will be, apart from the issue of its literary genre.

4. A more promising proof text for the traditional view is Revelation 14:9–11, which speaks of those persons who worshiped the beast and received its mark being “tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.” It goes further: “The smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast....” This text comes closest in my mind to confirming the traditional view. It would be ironical if the issue came down to the interpretation of a single verse in Revelation, given its uniqueness as a piece of literature. But it may do so because traditionalists, deprived of their substandard proof texts in other books of the Bible, will always resort to this passage, even though in view of the difficult genre of Revelation it does not put them in a very strong position.

Regarding Revelation 14:11, we observe that, while the smoke goes up forever, the text does not say the wicked are tormented forever. It says that they have no relief from their suffering as long as the suffering lasts, but it does not say how long it lasts. As such it could fit hell as annihilation or the traditional view. Before oblivion, there may be a period of suffering, but not unendingly. Besides not teaching the traditional view, the text does not describe the end of history either, which is termed the second death, an image very much in agreement with annihilation (Rev. 20:14).

I take John’s primary point throughout Revelation to be that everything that has rebelled against God will be overcome and come to an end. G. B. Caird catches the point: “John believed that, if at the end there should be any who remained impervious to the grace and love of God, they would be thrown, with Death and Hades, into the lake of fire which is the second death, i.e., extinction and total oblivion.”

Drawing my case to a conclusion, I am contending that the objections to the traditional view of the nature of hell are formidable and that the positive basis for understanding hell as annihilation is stronger than the case for the traditional view. Biblical exegesis, theological reasoning, and practical realities all strongly support the view of hell as annihilation.

COMMENTARY ON THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Theological method is an important factor that comes into play whenever we debate any subject in theology. For our reflections to be profound, we need to pick up on some of these dynamics. Since there are four main sources that are regularly appealed to (Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience), let us run a check of them and see what is going on in this debate.

The Bible. Concerning the Bible as source, there are two elements to watch in relation to its authority and interpretation. First, as to its authority, defenders of the traditional view of the nature of hell will often argue thus: “We dislike this doctrine of everlasting torment, but we have to accept it because the Bible teaches it. Does this not just go to show how highly we regard biblical authority?” They claim that believing in everlasting conscious torment is proof of faith in biblical authority and questioning it is proof of the denial of the Bible. Though this might be true in the case of religious liberals, the reader knows by now that this is irrelevant in the present instance. I share this respect for the authority of the Bible with traditionalists and am only contesting their *interpretation* of an authoritative Bible. This is an issue of biblical hermeneutics, not biblical authority.

In relation to biblical interpretation, a key issue is how to interpret eschatological texts. My impression is that traditionalists selectively over-interpret and over-literalize biblical symbols of the future. (I say selectively because most do not take the biblical language of perishing literally!) Being overly literal is unwise because eschatology is an area of biblical teaching (like creation) that what we know by way of specific factual information is limited. The Bible is reserved about giving detailed information about the nature of heaven or hell; therefore, modesty in interpretation is called for. Jesus’ sayings about hell, for example, are addressed more to the conscience than to intellectual curiosity. Details such as the time (Mark 13:32), the circumstances (Acts 1:6–7), and the nature (1 John 3:1) of future events are not given to us. My impression is that the traditional view of hell milks a small number of texts for details to support a theory the that Bible does not teach.

Tradition. Tradition plays a major role in determining people’s thinking about hell, so I will devote more space to this factor. Though scriptural support for hell as eternal conscious suffering is weak and objections against it are strong, tradition is a formidable argument for holding the traditional view. I do not feel at all comfortable contradicting the likes of Saint Anselm and John Calvin.

I agree that tradition is a valuable source for theology, though it needs correcting from time to time. The key issue here is whether it needs correcting on this detail of eschatology. Evangelicals are clearly not opposed in principle to changing traditions because they have done so regularly. For example, many of us reject infant baptism, double predestination, and the sacramentalism of the mass, all of which are ancient catholic traditions. Thus evangelicals are not in a position to oppose challenging the old view of the nature of hell just because it is an old tradition.

I think one has to look in other directions to explain evangelical stubbornness on this feature of the tradition. At this point, let me mention one such reason: They fear that a change on this would indicate they are going liberal. Many of them have decided that believing in everlasting conscious torment is a defining characteristic of evangelical belief. In a major conference in 1989 held to discuss what it means to be evangelical, it was seriously debated whether a person such as John Stott or Philip Hughes, who hold to hell as annihilation, should be considered

evangelicals. They can be accepted when sprinkling babies but perhaps not when advocating a revision of the tradition on the nature of hell. The vote to exclude such theologians who hold this opinion failed only narrowly. Obviously, a lot of people are wrestling with the legitimate limits of diversity in evangelicalism.

There is a conundrum here. Why do evangelicals who freely change old traditions in the name of the Bible refuse so adamantly even to consider changing this one? Why do they insist on holding to the old position as stated here: “Hence, beyond the possibility of doubt, the Church expressly teaches the eternity of the pains of hell as a truth of faith which no one can deny or call into question without manifest heresy.” There must be some factors other than Scripture or tradition driving the issue, factors that may show up when we review the remaining factors of theological method.

Before moving on, let me defend the option of making a change in the traditional doctrine of the nature of hell. All doctrines undergo a degree of development over time—issues such as Christology and soteriology get taken up at various periods in church history and receive a special stamp from intellectual and social conditions obtaining at the time. A variety of factors in society and thought impact the way in which issues are interpreted. All doctrinal formulations reflect to some extent historical and cultural conditions and have a historical quality to them.

Eschatology is not an exception to this principle but rather exemplifies it, having gone through so many changes over the years. Consider the change from the expectation in the New Testament and early church of the nearness of the second coming of Christ to the delayed expectation of later orthodox theologians in regard to it; from a millennial belief in the early centuries to the belief of Augustine that sees God’s rule in the world above and beyond history; from placing the final judgment at the end of history to expecting it at the moment of death; from an emphasis on the gloriously resurrected body to an emphasis on the naturally immortal soul, etc. Eschatology is a doctrine in which interpreters should be careful not to place uncritical confidence in what the tradition has said, since it has undergone several large changes and does not speak with a single voice.

With reference to the evangelical context, I realize that in interpreting hell as annihilation, I am adopting a minority view among evangelicals and placing myself at risk among them. Even though these same people permit dozens of differences to exist among themselves and have made many changes themselves to ancient traditions, somehow to propose this change is still forbidden. One can expect to be told that only heretics or near-heretics would think of denying the doctrine of everlasting conscious punishment and of defending annihilation. It seems that a new criterion of truth has been discovered which says that if Adventists or liberals hold any view, that view must be wrong. Apparently a truth claim can be decided by its associations and does not need to be tested by public criteria in open debate. Such an argument, though useless in intelligent discussion, can be effective with the ignorant who are fooled by such rhetoric. Thus, when a noted evangelical such as John W. Wenham shows himself open to hell as annihilation, it is put down to liberal influences in his publisher (InterVarsity Press) and to poor research on his part for thinking it.⁵⁴ The same thing happened to me when *Christianity Today* published my view of hell as annihilation (March 20, 1987); Adrian Rogers, then president of the Southern Baptist Convention, appealed to it to prove that my theology was going liberal.

But despite such tactics of harassment, the view is gaining ground among evangelicals. John R. W. Stott’s public endorsement of it will certainly encourage this trend. In a delicious piece of irony, this is creating a measure of accreditation by association, countering the same tactics used

against it. It has become all but impossible to claim that only heretics and near-heretics hold the position, though I am sure some will dismiss Stott's orthodoxy precisely on this ground.

Stott himself expresses anxiety lest he should become a source of division in the community in which he is a renowned leader. He writes:

I am hesitant to have written these things, partly because I have a great respect for longstanding tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the worldwide evangelical constituency has always meant much to me. But the issue is too important to suppress, and I am grateful to you (David Edwards) for challenging me to declare my present mind. I do not dogmatise about the position to which I have come. I hold it tentatively. But I do plead for frank dialogue among evangelicals on the basis of scripture. I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.

He is right to feel anxious on this score because he is proposing to change what orthodoxy has claimed about the nature of hell. Some will insist that it is an essential doctrine which Stott should have defended against Edwards. They will agree with William Shedd, who wrote: "The common opinion in the ancient church was, that the future punishment of the impenitent wicked is endless. This was the catholic faith; as much so as belief in the Trinity." As long as evangelicals hold this view, persons suggesting change will have to be viewed as heretics.

In closing, I propose turning the tables on the whole issue of hell in the tradition. Rather than insisting that the view of hell as everlasting conscious torment remain a defining characteristic of orthodox doctrine, we should be throwing it over. In fact, the entire set of beliefs surrounding hell, including unending torture, double predestination, and the delight that the saints are supposed to feel at the pains of the damned, does orthodox theology absolutely no good. This set of dismal ideas should be dumped in the name of credible doctrine. Why should sound doctrine have such burdens to bear? If we would clean up our act, it might even be possible to save hell as an intelligible belief.

Reason. Reason is also a valuable source for theology. Everyone uses reason in assessing the meaning of texts, in constructing doctrines, and in striving to understand. As Anselm said: "Faith seeks understanding."

Reason enters theology on both sides of the debate over eternal torment versus annihilation. Both sides are trying to present their position on hell as coherent in the light of God's nature as just and good. We saw that when we reviewed the issues around the areas of morality, justice, and metaphysics. On both sides, reasoning operates in a ministerial way, playing a role in deciding doctrinal questions. Though it is true that traditionalists appeal more often to mystery than annihilationists do, perhaps in order to get off the painful hook of some of the objections, the traditional view can be intelligently defended, and I leave the reader to decide which view is most reasonable.

Experience and Culture. Experience and culture is a fourth factor that affects theological judgment, as also appears on both sides of this debate. A lot of cultural and situational input enters into the discussion. We may even be on the track of the most important factor.

One can distinguish at least three such influences on the traditional side from experience and culture. First, there is the hellenistic belief in the immortality of the soul. As Swinburne says, "I suspect that one factor which influenced the Fathers and scholastics to affirm eternal sensory punishment was their belief in the natural immortality of the soul." Here is a secular belief influencing theology. Second, it has been common to use hell as a moral deterrent. Pusey used the belief as a whip to keep people in line, and he was not alone in this. The orthodox often fear

what will happen in society if the belief in everlasting torment were to decline. Would people not behave without moral restraint and the society devolve into anarchy? For such reasons William Shedd considered no doctrine more important than hell, given the increase of wealth and sinful excess he saw growing in the Western world. His reason for defending it, then, involves a strongly contextual factor. Third, Jonathan Edwards used hell to frighten people into faith, and he is not alone in this either. I have heard people oppose hell as annihilation on the grounds that it isn't frightening enough and would let the wicked off too easily. Everlasting conscious punishment is a huge stick that some people do not want to give up. It has always been used to promote the urgency of missions, and the strongest objection to any revision may well come from missionary agencies.⁶⁰

These three points are powerful and make me wonder whether the true strength of the traditional view of hell does not lie in experience and culture rather than in Scripture, tradition, or reason. If so, the irony would be that the traditionalists are operating in the case of hell out of an essentially liberal methodology that makes primary use of contextual factors in respect to doctrine.

But are annihilationists perhaps in the same situation with the experience-culture factor dominating their view as well? There is some evidence of this. The reader will have detected, for example, strong emotion in my rejection of the traditional view. Obviously, I am rejecting the traditional view of hell in part out of a sense of moral and theological revulsion to it. The idea that a conscious creature should have to undergo physical and mental torture through unending time is profoundly disturbing, and the thought that this is inflicted upon them by divine decree offends my conviction about God's love. This is probably the primary reason why people question the tradition so vehemently in the first place. They are not first of all impressed by its lack of a good scriptural basis (that comes later) but are appalled by its awful moral implications. This process shows that along with Scripture, they are drawing on moral intuitions in their theological reflection, just as their opponents are doing in theirs. Both sides clearly draw upon the resources of subjectivity and relevance, though my judgment is that the traditionalists are more affected by it than annihilationists.

CONCLUSION

I conclude that the traditional belief that God makes the wicked suffer in an unending conscious torment in hell is unbiblical, is fostered by a hellenistic view of human nature, is detrimental to the character of God, is defended on essentially pragmatic grounds, and is being rejected by a growing number of biblically faithful, contemporary scholars. I believe that a better case can be made for understanding the nature of hell as termination—better biblically, anthropologically, morally, judicially, and metaphysically.

But whatever hell turns out to be like, it is a very grim prospect. Though annihilationism makes hell less of a torture chamber, it does not lessen its extreme seriousness. After all, to be rejected by God, to miss the purpose for which one was created, to pass into oblivion while others enter into bliss, to enter nonbeing—this will mean weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hell is a terrifying possibility, the possibility of using our freedom to lose God and destroy ourselves. Of course, we do not know who or how many will be damned, because we do not know who will finally say No to God. What we do know is that sinners may finally reject salvation, that absolute loss is something to be reckoned with. I do not think one needs to know more about hell than that.

In the current situation, given the difficulties that attend the traditional view of the nature of hell, I think it is possible that changing our view would be a wise step. Rather than threatening the doctrine of hell, it may actually preserve it. The fact is that the tradition of everlasting conscious torment is causing more and more people today to deny hell altogether and accept universal salvation in order to avoid its sadistic horror; on the other hand, the view of the nature of hell that I am proposing does not involve sadism, though it does retain belief in the biblical category of the second death. In any case, the objections to the traditional view of the nature of hell are so strong and its supports so weak that it is likely soon to be replaced with something else. The real choice is between universalism and annihilationism, and of these two, annihilation is surely the more biblical, because it retains the realism of some people finally saying No to God without turning the notion of hell into a monstrosity.⁸

⁸ Pinnock, C. H. (1996). [The Conditional View](#). In S. N. Gundry & W. Crockett (Eds.), *Four Views on Hell* (pp. 133–166). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Finality Viewed Position

ANNIHILATION
IDEA FINDS ITS
ORIGINS IN THE
END CHAPTER
OF CICERO'S
"REPUBLIC"
THE DREAM
OF SCIPIO

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Conditional Immortality Is Argued Asserting An Issue Of Biblical Hermeneutics Not Biblical Authority By Way Of:

- First, their claim that Biblical texts on our future condition, like those on creation, supply little by way of specific information; The Bible is reserved about giving us details enough to satisfy our curiosity & it hangs hiddenness over the subject; In other words, for the student of the Bible - this topic has some gray area - thus – more room for personal opinion.
- Second, their claim that it is more scriptural, theologically coherent, and practical to interpret the nature of hell as the everlasting destruction rather than endless torture of the wicked – their extinction rather than eternality; In such spiritual context - human freedom is defined not as ability to make choices infinitely – but - the capacity to make choices of infinite significance.
- Third, their claim that the ultimate result of rejecting God is self-destruction, closure with God, and absolute death in body, soul, and spirit – He withdraws the divine creative-sustaining power - the second death of Revelation 20: 14, 15.

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Conditional Immortality Is Argued Asserting An Issue Of Biblical Hermeneutics Not Biblical Authority By Way Of:

- Fourth, their claim that Conditional Immortality has plausibility as interpretation and also integrity as an option. This view links logically the language of fire and destruction to suggest annihilation – leading us to the conclusion that - “eternal punishment” refers simply to the type judgment – final & divine - whose results cannot be reversed.
- Fifth, their claim that the other points of view all assume an anthropology of man both inaccurate and unbiblical. Basically, they think it wrong to consider the soul as an indestructible incorporeal and separate substance. C. I. Advocates assert that this faulty and false take on present earthly existence has inserted itself as presupposition into every other scenario of afterlife existence. The C. I. School believes that this idea of natural immortality is of Hellenistic origin and has deluded especially those of western culture into a fundamental departure from basic truth.
- Sixth, their claim that the Bible warns instead against absolute loss in hell and points instead to the resurrection of the body as God’s gift to believers; Although, God did create the race of man in this life mortal, He designed each individual with a potential of capacity for life everlasting.

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Conditional Immortality Is Argued Asserting An Issue Of Biblical Hermeneutics Not Biblical Authority By Way Of:

- Seventh, their claim that the position they advance on the nature of hell is not only the most adequate in terms of exegesis and rational theological coherence, but the best in order to preserve the eschatological doctrine as an outreach instrument – neither of the literalism or universalism extremes are effective tools of evangelism. Better than best – this portrayal avoids the impression that God is either vengeful or vindictive by behavioral standards of human conduct - and - being frightfully respected - but - never truly loved.
- Therefore, Hell is the possibility that human beings may chose in their freedom and this choice breaks relations with the Father; Nevertheless, God still loves these persons, desires their salvation, and does not choose death for them.
- Hell is not the beginning of a new immortal life in torment but the end of a life of rebellion; It is ending in oblivion instead of entering a state of bliss; Said by C. S. Lewis: “Hell is the outer rim where being fades away into nonentity.”

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Conditional Immortality Is Argued Asserting An Issue Of Biblical Hermeneutics Not Biblical Authority By Way Of:

- Old Testament Scriptural Support References Passages In Psalm 37 & Malachi 4.
- New Testament Scriptural Support: Speaking on the subject of the spiritual hereafter as a “Gehenna” – The Lord Jesus chose words that would underline the importance of the decision to be made here and now – not those of descriptive detail as to its nature; He echoed the afterlife treatment of John the Baptist in Matthew 3: 10 & 12.
- Questions Raised By The C. I. Devotees About The Traditional Discipline Include –
 - 1) Is not our Father Creator a God of boundless mercy? 2) How then can we project from that an “Abba” Deity of such cruelty? 3) Would God who tells us to love our enemies be intending to wreck vengeance on His enemies for all eternity? 4) What would we think of a human being that satisfied his thirst for revenge so implacably & insatiably? 5) What human crimes deserve everlasting conscious torture? 6) Lastly, How do we reconcile this view – the orthodox perspective - with our basic claims & prayerful proclamations as to the moral goodness & benevolent intent of our Maker?

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Conditional Immortality Is Argued Asserting An Issue Of Biblical Hermeneutics Not Biblical Authority By Way Of:

- Questions Raised By The C. I. Devotees About The Emblematic Explanation Include - 1) Why do you suppose the fire is not material and will not burn? 2) Are we not equipped in some manner of body and soul with means so as to feel its heat? 3) What is gained if the torment is in its effect equally intense? 4) If mental suffering symbolized is as grievous as the physical pain literalized, how does this help us? In other words, while it may not be the traditional perspective, it is not an improved interpretation over the orthodox either.
- The One Big Question Usually Raised By The C. I. Devotees About Purgation Positions Of General and Blanket Coverage Is Of Consequential Significance - Does Refining Fire So Trespass As To Violate Free Will? - In other words: “God may wish to save everybody, but what if someone does not want to be saved?” Grave Answer To A Grave Question: If the human gift of freedom is to be assumed as for forever, neither can our divine Maker - create - nor our rightful Master - command - our true response to love.

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Conditional Immortality Is Argued Asserting An Issue Of Biblical Hermeneutics Not Biblical Authority By Way Of:

- Defenders Of Conditional Immortality Claim Annihilation Passes The Human Test Of Moral Coherence That The Literal Approach Cannot; God Is Morally Justified To Destroy The Wicked Because He Respects Their Human Choices. To Affirm Hell Means Accepting Human Significance. Sinners Do Not Have To Be Saved & Should Not Be Made To. The Almighty That Desires Fellowship Will Not Force Friendship. In The End He Will Allow Us To Become What We Have Chosen!
- Defenders Of Conditional Immortality Claim That God Will Ultimately Utilize The Earliest Revealed Standard Of Divine Justice - Strict Equivalence: Eye For An Eye & Tooth For A Tooth (Exodus 21: 24); Even So - Mosaic Command Curtailed An Unlimited Retaliation In Those Cases Where An Equating Was Impossible.
- Anselm Put Forth First The Argument That Our Sins Are Worthy Of Infinite Punishment Because They Are Committed Against An Infinite Majesty; This Type Of Verdict For The Wicked Would Sentence To An Unredemptive Suffering; Such Punishment For Its Own Sake Runs Counter To That Revealed In The Scripture In Terms Of Immediate Purpose, Proximate Goals & Ultimate Objective.

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Conditional Immortality Is Argued Asserting An Issue Of Biblical Hermeneutics Not Biblical Authority By Way Of:

- **Moral Deterrent:** Historically, The Orthodox Position Has Found Its Greatest Defenders Among Civil Religionists, Sophisticated Elitists – Personally Indifferent Individuals Who Fashion Themselves Watchful Guardians Of The Established Order – Those Less Interested In Promoting Advertising Of Actual Truth Than In Evangelically Perpetuating A Relevant & Effective Utility Of Social Control.
- **Double Predestination:** Defenders Of Conditional Immortality Take The Offense - Linking The Traditionalists Camp With The Theological Determinism Of Calvinism; This Tenet Teaches No Egress Nor Any Escape – This Life Or The Next; Instead It Foreordains - Most Nations & People Groups Of History - Along With The Great Majority Of Individuals - To An Unsaved Fate; Moreover, It Then Turns Around, Relegating This Same Mass Of Hopeless Humanity - To An Endless Torture.
- **Cosmological Dualism:** The Final Objection Of The Conditional School Against All Others – Human History Ends Like Poor Story – Victorious, God Does Not Vanquish Completely The Foe; There Is No Real Resolution To The Rebellion – There Remains Two Opposed Kingdoms In Imposed Separation With An Non-Traversable Distance In-Between – It Implies A Sequel!

goodsalt.com

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Conditional Immortality Is Argued Asserting An Issue Of Biblical Hermeneutics Not Biblical Authority By Way Of:

- **Extending Thought To Logical Conclusion:** According To The C. I. Theory - After The Wicked End – The Envisioned Final State Is - An Ultimate Aesthetic Of Absolute Perfection & A Completed Condition Of Totalized Harmony!
- **Many Christians Feel Uncomfortable With The Positions On Either Extreme – Neither The Possibility Of An Subjective & Endless Existence Of The Lost In A State Of Constant & Conscious Sensory Torment Nor The Possibility Of An Ultimate & Universal Salvation For The Entire Human Race; Those Who Do Not Consider Cosmic Coincidence-Of-Opposites Or Even The Very Idea Of Such Eventual Reunification As An Answer Either Serious Or Scriptural – Seem To Find In The Middle Moderate Concept Of Conditional Immortality Some Sense Of Spiritual Solace.**

goodsalt.com



(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle
The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction -
Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option

Those Arguing Against Conditional Immortality Assert An Issue Of Bible Authority Not Hermeneutic In Terms Of:

- First, Hell does not make sense to us. Everything we know has a beginning and an end. Furthermore, we even have trouble imagining such a gloomy place where sinners continue to exist without hope and where the duration of time is meaningless; It seems to us savage beyond belief; However, human opinion does not change a situation. If hell were held to a vote it would lose – yet it would remain real. It is as useless to war against hell as it was for the Devil and his angels to war against heaven.
- Second, wishful thinking is a dangerous activity. There is penalty for unbelief – Jeremiah 38: 17, 18 & 39: 6; Ideas do have their consequences. Like warring against heaven, warring against hell may guarantee consignment to that place both for self and those influenced.
- Third, non-literal interpretations are not what God intended to be understood, internalized and by priority applied. The view to which we hold links both to - one’s world and life views – both our choices in evangelical discipleship and lifestyle.
- Fourth, all other doctrines of hell have their origin in hell – The Devil & His Angels!

(c) Heartlight <http://www.heartlight.org> by Phil Ware

Afterlife Annihilationist Perspective

- **This View Affirms – Both By Precept & Principle The Bible Teaches – Hell’s Absolute Destruction - Endless Existence Is God’s Offer & Man’s Option**

Those Arguing Against Conditional Immortality Assert An Issue Of Bible Authority Not Hermeneutic In Terms Of:

- **Conditional Immortality Challenges The Doctrine Of Scriptural Inerrancy: The Clear Teachings Of Christ Are Labeled “Culturally Misrepresentative”; Our Own Western Concepts & Value Systems Are Being Super-Imposed In Definitions & Descriptions Of “Complete Conquest” & “Perfect Harmony”.**
- **The Concept Of Conditional Immortality Interprets What Is Intended As Literal In A Non-Literal Sense: The Truth Of The Matter Is That Those Eternally Condemned Will Suffer Anguish & Experience Retribution After Death In Continual Consciousness & Without Hope Of Moral Restoration.**
- **The Conditional View Of Immortality Of The Wicked Interprets Passages On Destruction Of The Wicked Inaccurately & Selectively Ignores Those Which Contradict Conclusions Of Life After Death: Those Passages Of Verse That Refer To The Destruction Of The Unforgiven Relate To Their Physical Death Alone and Not The Cessation Of Their Existence – Hebrews 9: 27, 28.**