

The Day After Time:

God Put the
“More” in Forever

THE DAY AFTER TIME

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God put the 'more' in Forever -
Beyond the Boundary of Time.

Almost certainly God is not in time. His life does not consist of moments one following another... Ten- thirty -- and every other moment from the beginning of the world-- is always present for Him. If you like to put it this way, He has all eternity in which to listen to the split second of [a] prayer. -C.S. Lewis

John King

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INTRODUCTIONS

I find the thought reasonable that on the eve of man's final day on earth, God Who controls all things will decide our destiny. Only God who made the world should have the right to destroy it; so as time runs down, as man draws closer to discovering the means of his own destruction and the disposition to use it, as a believer I trust God to intervene. This is the backdrop here for my inquiry into scripture—not to confirm this scene, which I maintain is inevitable, but to apply an academic inquisitiveness into the Book of all books, asking one question: What happens to mankind then? This will be the first day after the last day ...the day after time.

...as you wait eagerly for the day of God to come. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.¹ ..there should be time no longer.²

¹ 2 Peter 3:12

² Revelation 10:6 KJV. Translations generally write "time" here as "delay" and I appreciate the gesture. We are reluctant to impose on scripture an idea "the end of time" that is never used elsewhere for eternity. By grammatical rule we can read not simply "time is no more" but "the time is no more", i.e. the delay or wait is over. But it is more common to read another word for "time" while speaking of a season of time, *χαίρος*. Here we read *χρονος* or time in general, referencing Revelation 6:11. Here the martyred saints are told to patiently wait for a time. That time is over. The wait is over here in Revelation 10:6. But verse 7 records what's next: the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets. It seems reasonable to represent 10:6 with the full force of the prophecy. Time *is* ...no more....

Like any believer, there is a certain excited anticipation in the thought of Jesus' return and a favored assumption that on that day He will welcome us into pure bliss, but, to quote the Psalmist, "Not so the wicked!"³

I have been troubled reflecting on the passages of Scripture that warn of the painful awareness awaiting those who must face a God they were convinced did not exist. The following essay is a rather technical exegesis of 3 verses in particular that I have sought to more fully acquaint myself with in the hopes that I may have missed some aspect of Divine Grace that will accompany that day.

- ◆ 2 Peter 2:9 the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.⁴
- ◆ Hebrews 10:29 How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?⁵
- ◆ Matthew 25:46 Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.⁶

There are other attending verses every believer should be familiar with:

- ◆ Mark 9:43-48 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed

³ Psalm 1:4 They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

⁴ οιδεν κυριος ευσεβεις εκ πειρασμου ρυεσθαι αδικους δε εις ημεραν κρισεως κολαζομενους τηρειν

⁵ ποσω δοκειτε χειρονος αξιωθησεται τιμωριας ο τον υιον του θεου καταπατησας και το αιμα της διαθηκης κοινον ηγησαμενος εν ω ηγιασθη και το πνευμα της χαριτος ενυβρισας

⁶ και απελευσονται ουτοι εις κολασιν αιωνιον οι δε δικαιοι εις ζωνην αιωνιον

than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, 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, where 'the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.'⁷

- ◆ Isaiah 66:24 And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.⁸
- ◆ Isaiah 25:8 He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.⁹

But these verses, along with others, are supportive since the thrust of the message, the emphasis, and the finality of God's actions are indisputably all encompassing in the first three above. Mark joins Matthew in declaring such painful possibilities. Isaiah, too, along with a few Psalms will further our insight in the use of language to persuade the unheeding to take warning.

⁷ vs. 48 οπου ο σκωληξ αυτων ου τελευτα και το πυρ ου σβεννυται
 Matthew 18:8 reads eternal fire - τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον instead of Mark 9:43 fire never goes out - τὸ πῦρ τὸ ἄσβεστον

⁸ Daniel 12:2 "Multitudes who sleep in the dust the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt"

⁹ בְּלֹעַ הַמָּוֶת לְנֹצֵחַ וּמִתָּה אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה דְּמָעָה מֵעַל כָּל-פְּנִיִם וְחִרְפָּת עִמּוֹ יִסִּיר מֵעַל כָּל-הָאָרֶץ כִּי יְהוִה דִּבֶּר:

PERSONAL CONCERNS

In my work, *“Challenged: Living our Faith in a Postmodern Age”* I devote a chapter to the subject of eternal punishment but not from the standpoint of the words used nor specifically the prophetic context in which God is expected, in Daniel’s words, “to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy”¹⁰ In “Challenged” I attempt an explanation for believers from the standpoint of their family and friends who do not believe the Bible. That work was dedicated to the idea that since, in the perspective of the agnostic and atheistic, there exists a reasonable literary and cultural explanation of *Gehenna* (*hell*), it should be helpful for believers to hear them out ... while prayerfully awaiting God’s opportunity to draw them to Himself.

Here I am concerned as deeply about those we love who do not share our faith, but I write from the perspective of the language and what it might mean in hopes that we have perchance misinterpreted what is agreeably a most horrifying description of final judgment coming from a God whose nature is love.¹¹

My primary concern, and it should be most of ours, is that people we care about and love who have left the faith we cherish—or may never had known such a salvation—appear to be described in this nightmarish narrative—something we cannot imagine for long before

¹⁰ Daniel 9:24

¹¹ I John 4:16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

we are begging God, regardless our theology, to rescue them from such a judgment.

SO MANY QUESTIONS

We might rationalize away a lot in an effort to assuage the burden we carry for them—it is far too painful to carry a “Jonathan Edwards” message in our hearts: *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. So we ask some very real questions:

- ◆ Does God give credit for living a peaceful life even if there is no church life in their picture?¹²
- ◆ They are living a good life! Could God say, “No” to that!?¹³
- ◆ Is it possible that some of the things I think are sinful in their life might not be? So much of today’s society is not addressed in the Scriptures. Maybe they are *not* sinning as the preacher supposed.
- ◆ They were closer to the Lord as young children. Doesn’t this mean that the Word has prophesied their return to Him?¹⁴
- ◆ I have wept before the Lord on their behalf. Does not the Word say, “*The LORD is close to the*

¹² Isaiah 32:17 The fruit of that righteousness will be peace;

¹³ John 28-29 Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

Matthew 16:27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

¹⁴ Proverbs 22:6 Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”¹⁵?

SO MANY GUESSES

And on it goes.... As christians we are famous for

- ◆ Reading into the scriptural text what is not there,
- ◆ Rationalizing that the Scripture is not talking about us or our family,
- ◆ Thinking, perhaps, this text is spurious¹⁶ and was never suppose to be part of the inspired Word of God, or
- ◆ Grace, by definition, means God makes the first and important move to save a soul and too much emphasis shouldn't be placed on their current state. After all, its only a half-time score.

Holding these questions in abeyance, we begin....

¹⁵ Psalm 34:18. Could we argue that God has promised to save us from such a heavy burden by saving them!

¹⁶ According to the Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament by Bruce M. Metzger no text under consideration here from the New Testament is in any sense questionable.

ETERNITY

“The O.T. Words representing duration, and their Greek equivalents, call for careful consideration in consequence of the fact that the revelation of man’s future destiny must depend to some extent upon their accurate interpretation.”¹⁷

I wanted to separate out the two thoughts of Matthew 25:46 *Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.* I want life to be forever but not punishment and yet the same modifier “eternal” is used for *both*. That’s a problem since the heart churns with sorrowful and terrifying thoughts of loved ones lost somewhere in a horrifying nightmare ...FOREVER[?]

“Eternity” sounds, from a grammatical point of view, simplistically uninteresting but perhaps it might take on a completely different appeal if we realized that there is no biblical word for it. “Eternity” is an abstract idea. “Eternity” is not something we experience in a natural way in this life. All around us is evidence of the temporality of all things.¹⁸ Everything dies.¹⁹ In a look ahead, we will discover that the Biblical term means an undetermined but limited amount of time. And there are reasons for this which we shall explore. But for now, what was the Lord saying—or what was He thinking—when He escorted Adam and Eve from the Garden remarking sadly

The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.²⁰

¹⁷ Girdlestone, 312

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

¹⁹ Hebrews 9:27 Just as people are destined to die once

²⁰ Genesis 3:22

The word used here for “forever”²¹ is a *terminus ad quem* or limited or bounded only by its use in context. Isaiah 35:10 speaks of a perpetual gladness. How else should we understand it:²²

...those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

The true nature of *eternity* is found in this word in those passages which speak of the *immortal* nature of God himself, who is called “the eternal God,”²³ The metaphysical idea of eternity, at least that which has no end, is more nearly approached by the examples in which the Hebrew word is applied to the earth and the whole nature of things: *The earth remains forever.*²⁴ *He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.*²⁵

The peoples of the Bible were “people of the earth” and when Adam and Eve exited God’s garden they were introduced to pain, toil and eventually death. Ancient peoples developed language to express themselves and relay their experiences.²⁶ But the language of heaven had not been shared with them yet by God.²⁷

The ancients were not philosophers talking in the abstract or imagining the unimaginable. They were not scientists dealing in x’s and y’s. Thus their language

עלם²¹

²² Yet some scholars are reluctant to rescue this scene or prophecy from the restrictions of time. [”]

²³ Genesis 21:33

²⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:4

²⁵ Psalm 104:5

²⁶ According to the Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament there are 9 different words “to kill” in our O.T. but only one “to give life.”

²⁷ A brief study of “grace” in scripture will reveal the difficulty God must have to reveal Himself and His kingdom to us.

developed a poetic genius for describing things in concrete terms.²⁸ They even gave all nature life.²⁹ According to Ernst von Dobschutz Hebrew thinking moved *in time*.³⁰

And when it comes to the idea of the eternal we shouldn't expect much more from the New Testament—as we shall see.³¹ *“The New Testament writers were firmly rooted in the Old Testament and lived in its world of images.”*³² In simple terms: The Bible writers were inspired to talk about *this life* and our witness here and now. They spoke only vaguely and rarely about eternity. They shared hints at a reality to come that is hard to explain with the limitations our understanding, and therefore our language, imposes on our perception³³ of timelessness or endless time or infinite time.

Said in a adage: Is was *God Who* puts the 'more' in forever. To appreciate eternity, *forevermore*, is to have a glimpse of the very nature of the *God Who* lives there.

DURATION

Eternity in the biblical world was the idea of “*duration*.” Scholarship tells us that in the Old Testament

²⁸ When God “hated” Esau, it was God’s decision to give the birthright to his brother, Jacob that was in the writer’s thoughts. Love and hate were not abstract terms but tied inseparable to actions or expressions of these qualities.

²⁹ Psalm 97:6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory.

Psalm 98:8 Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;

³⁰ Journal of Biblical Literature, XLI (1922), 212ff.

³¹ An awareness of the spiritual through faith and answered prayer are real parts of a believer’s experience. But in I Corinthians 13:12 Paul reminds us, “*Now I know in part; then I shall know fully...*”

³² Bowman, Introduction

³³ I John 3:2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.

there are ten different terms marking *duration*.³⁴ Some concepts are admittedly difficult to discuss intelligently. Discussing *eternity*, we are like someone who has never left the house discussing what it's like to be in a busy market place. We are naturalists and people of this earth talking about heaven. Paul said it right:

*And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.*³⁵

And again He affirms that there is a spiritual dimension, another world, which we often reference as believers and which our faith is invested in, that the natural mind—something we all have—is unable to explain. The two realms are mutually exclusive worlds.³⁶ “*There is no solution of the problem, however*” writes Bowman,³⁷ “*but only a dismissal of the problem of infinity*;³⁸ according to [Immanuel] Kant³⁹ all experience is finite, and so infinity does not belong within the range of our experience.” Max Mueller, a British philologist, wrote,⁴⁰ “*The infinite is hidden from the senses, ...denied by Reason, but ... perceived by Faith.*”⁴¹

³⁴ Girdlestone, 312f

³⁵ 2 Corinthians 12:3-4

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.

³⁷ Bowman, 160

³⁸ infinite space is the universe; infinite time is eternity.

³⁹ cp. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 299f.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p 448. Max Mueller says very well.

⁴¹ Faith, for the believer in Christ, introduces them to this spiritual world. Faith is not just a belief but an awareness, a real introduction into our first acquaintance in this life with heavenly things. We have a keen awareness of a reality beyond the physical or natural [2 Corinthians 5:5;

For me: while praying, God is not the One Who holds the universe in place, nor is He even the One Who will someday destroy it. This makes Him appear too huge, too awesome and glorious, and far beyond my ability to comprehend Who He really is. When I talk to Him I commune with a friend. I am mindful of the Jesus who clothed in human form humbly strolled the lanes of human traffic and felt everything I feel—the God Who can say to me, “I understand because I have been there, too.” Eternal beings—though I, too am one—move outside this realm of suffering I find myself in and, although, I fully know and appreciate the fact that God, the eternal Father, does, indeed know and care, I somehow through the work of Christ Jesus, bring Him, in my thinking, closer, to my level, and walk with Him in peace.

FOREVER

If you look for *eternity* in a concordance, start your search with “for ever.” In the Old Testament, one term refers to the passing of time,⁴² the duration of time, and thus, says the dictionary, “perpetuity of time,” or in our lingo: eternity.

*The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.*⁴³

The dictionary then references another word we interpret as eternity in the Old Testament. It is defined as “hidden time, [a] long [time], the beginning or end of

Colossians 3:1-3]. Faith is trusting Jesus to return for us after He has finished preparing eternity to receive us [John 14:1] and us to accept eternity [Revelation 21:2].

⁴² Even Plato philosophizes that “Time will perish with the Heavens.” and “The past and future do not relate to eternal being; hence being does not belong to time.” - Kittell vol IX, p. 583

⁴³ Psalms 19:9

which is uncertain or else not defined.” There is one word used to define both Old Testament terms: perpetuity. Thus the ancients used both words in one phrase:

*The LORD is King for ever [1st word] and ever [2nd word]*⁴⁴

What they are actually saying is, “throughout time...” One scholar reminds us:

*Hebrew equivalents for eternity are temporal to the extent that they do not signify things beyond [time or eternity] but things pertaining to this life. Because our idea of eternity is religiously colored, it is advisable to avoid this term when we want to translate Hebrew equivalents into our language and to translate them by means of the notion of 'boundless time.'*⁴⁵

This is why the word “forever” makes perfect sense to the ancients when a slave’s devotion to his master was “perpetual ...forever” or throughout his lifetime. The NIV tidies this up for us by translating it “for life.” which is NOT what the Bible said but is what the Bible meant:

*Then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life [Hebrew: forever].*⁴⁶

In the Old Testament using this word to describe a servant’s faithful lifespan makes perfect sense. Does this mean that when the angel “swore by Him [God] who lives forever...” in Daniel 12:7 that God is not eternal!?

I heard him swear by him who lives forever ...

Of course not! In every sense possible God is eternal, forever and ever... It just has to be said within the limitation of a language (Old Testament Hebrew) that, in

⁴⁴ *Psalms 10:16* יהוה מלך עולם ועד

⁴⁵ *Thorleif Bowman p. 151*

⁴⁶ *Exodus 21:6*

all honesty, does not have our word “eternal.” So David explains it this way [and you can read “eternal” into his thought]

- ◆ For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead;⁴⁷ ...
- ◆ Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, **from everlasting** [time immemorial] **to everlasting** [time in perpetuity] you are God.⁴⁸
- ◆ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures [is established] **forever**. [God’s Word is not transitory]⁴⁹

(God’s Word is NOT true now or then, but consistently and always true and applicable to the conduct of a holy life as long as time endures ... and beyond.) Bowman notes “*The Hebrews simply think of the matter in an entirely different way.*”⁵⁰

What about the New Testament, then?

THE AGES TO COME

The New Testament word for forever is our word eon, “age” Jude said it right:

⁴⁷ Romans 1:20

⁴⁸ Psalm 91:2

⁴⁹ Isaiah 40:8

⁵⁰ Bowman, P 154]

*To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before **all ages**, now and **forevermore!** [into all ages] Amen.⁵¹*

This is what one scholar refers to as the “boundless Beyond,” from the ages to the ages to come, i.e. forever and ever.⁵² But this is still “*the aggregate of things contained in time.*”⁵³ An “age” in natural or logical terms is a time frame, a set time with a beginning and an end. But does the Bible say more? The New Testament sees two ages: the present⁵⁴ and the one to come.⁵⁵ “The ages to come” becomes a metaphor for eternity, (notice the plural!) even though—think about it—we are using a term, “age,” that is bounded. In other words, it has a beginning and an end date. It makes good Greek but in terms of representing eternity in the Bible it is grammatically—if not theologically—ambiguous.

*“Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much **in this age**, and in the **age to come eternal life** [ageless life]”⁵⁶*

The Greek language is not only tied to “time” but it envisions a PERIOD of time. As such the word often in the New Testament refers to this world (38 times in the King James) and is compared to the present time. Look at another translation of Luke 18:30:

⁵¹ *Jude 25*

⁵² *Ephesians 2:7*

⁵³ *Thayer’s Dictionary*

⁵⁴ *Galatians 1:4* who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

⁵⁵ *Ephesians 2:7* in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

⁵⁶ *Luke 18:29-30*

...who shall ... receive manifold more in this time, and in the world to come eternal life. ASV

This age to come is the same as the world to come [Mark 10:29-30].⁵⁷

It is more difficult to wrap our minds around the idea of an eternity *past*.

OF OLD

The distant past is one way to interpret any reference to God while marking the first moments of His mercy or creativity. These might have begun—if I may say it—with a bang, a big bang. But clearly His thoughts preceded all this. When did God first think about us? About our salvation!?

Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.⁵⁸ ...and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.⁵⁹

I like to ask friends, “If God has always been (and He always has been) why did He wait so long to create Adam for fellowship?” The idea behind this quiz being that no matter when God created the world, He was still alone for an eternity past. The point of this absurd exercise in logic is to demonstrate how our minds, and our logic, cannot explain what is eternal—past or future. The

⁵⁷ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.

⁵⁸ Psalm 25:6 (LXX 24:6) ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος [from the age] ...

Heb. מֵעוֹלָם from forever

⁵⁹ Ephesians 3:9 for ages past was kept hidden in God == του αποκρυμμενου απο των αιωνων εν τω θεω

question cannot be answered in this dimension of reality we call “time.”

The answer to this inquiry is that God has always—from eternity past—had us on His heart. There is no simpler way of viewing the scriptures. For those who care to dwell on this point: the idea of infinity, whether in math or logic—is just outside the boundary of our knowledge. Infinite *space* is the boundless [multi?] *universe*; infinite *time* is *eternity*. We use these terms with a jejuné—perhaps, disingenuous—boast that we know something when we don’t.

Professor Taylor Lewis wrote (and I think it applicable here), “[One] *may know that a thing is, that it must be, though not how it is. So here, a ... necessity compels us to hold that there is such a region of the divine [the eternal]..., most intensely real,—more real, if we may make degrees, than knowledge or intellectuality...*”⁶⁰

I have every right to a faith that knows that there is an eternal God Who loves us enough to enter our world, to enter time as a baby in His mother’s arms and learn and grow and, yes, die, in the execution of an eternal plan to get us into His.

HEAVEN

The Bible recognizes the limitations imposed on our logic and our ability to comprehend eternal Truth. Thoughts of heaven and heavenly things in Scripture are referenced without detailed explanations ...and are scarce. Most of these are visible representations or impressions from visions of things to come which leaves our logic

⁶⁰ Lange, John Peter. *Commentary of the Holy Scriptures* Vol 1, Page 288

starved for clarification. These are a picturesque view of heaven which imaginative church leadership enjoys referencing, bypassing a thousand questions that this description prompts. ...streets of gold⁶¹ , a palatial and lavish table spread as a marriage feast⁶² for innumerable guests all wearing white⁶³ and drinking a divine vintage.⁶⁴

This becomes a “this world” description of an “other world” event! As noted briefly elsewhere God’s people in earlier times loved to describe things with poetic license, colorful language, and idioms⁶⁵ that offered little real world clarity. The streets probably shown with the glory of God in the presence of Jesus whom the Bible calls “the light.”⁶⁶ I suggest, as always, we interpret eternal truth with an open heart, ready to embrace any correction God brings to our attention.⁶⁷

We are currently in a temporal age and the Bible recognizes this.

IN THE BEGINNING

⁶¹ Revelation 21:21

⁶² Revelation 19:9

⁶³ Revelation 6:11 Then each of them was given a white robe

⁶⁴ Mark 14:25

⁶⁵ A study in God’s Glory will bear this out. Every description is a visualization of the effects of God’s presence while the actual Glory of God is better defined in terms of His Holiness.

Exodus 24:17 To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.

⁶⁶ Revelation 21:23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

⁶⁷ Is it possible that the white robes were simply reflecting the glory of God?

Luke 9:29 As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.

Genesis 1:1 begins with “*In the beginning...*” which can only mean “in the beginning of *time*. And the Bible ends with Revelation 22:5 when God removes the sun and moon and replaces these with His glory as our source of light.⁶⁸ The sun and moon were also our means for telling time. The Scriptures begin and end *in time*. In a sense the remaining final verses Revelation 22:6-21 are an epilogue to this age when all time ends, judgment is finalized, ..and heaven begins.

The age of time is the age of Scripture. We live within this dispensation of grace, the time when the message of Calvary is still viable, still proclaimed, still very much God’s agenda. This age will someday end.

DISPENSATIONALISM

“In Hebrews 9:26,”⁶⁹ concludes Girdlestone, “the word *age* is here thought to answer rather to the sense in which the word *dispensation* is now used.”⁷⁰ It makes sense that we think in dispensational terms. History is best learned chronologically. Even the biologist’s taxonomic representation of species is said to be arranged in “ages” of evolutionary change. (Evolution requires a viable chronology as proof of concept.) It is natural for us to arrange our thoughts using time boundaries as a tool for learning.

But is this the best way to understand God’s Word and, therefore, God’s thoughts? How about the letters to

⁶⁸ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.

⁶⁹ Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the **culmination of the ages** to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

⁷⁰ Girdlestone, 318

the seven churches in the Revelation of Jesus. Are these seven church *ages*—something taught over the years in many christian circles? If this is so, does this mean we are living in the last church age: Laodicea, and the previous six letters have no relevance to us? I offer here an alternative possibility based on a common reference in all the letters to a dying church witness (the lampstand)

The 7 letters to the 7 churches in Revelation 2-3 has been a favorite portion of the dispensationalists pointing to 7 different ages of the church. But can not a scripture offer us multiple meanings?

I bring this up here to point out a number of concerns:

- ◆ How easy it is for us to think in terms of time frames, dates, and dispensations. We need to be aware of the limitation our logic might impose on our understanding of the mind of God. We need to allow the patience of our faith to wait on questions to which our logic cannot provide reasonable answers.
- ◆ This word “age” is found in our verse in Matthew 25:46 *Then they will go away to **eternal** punishment*, but is it a dispensational punishment that comes to an end or is it actually timeless? (We have yet to look at the word *punishment*, itself.)
- ◆ A third and important point is that the message of scripture is, as one song writer called it, a “conflict of the ages.” We are in the age of witness, the age of the Divine message, the time in which the Message of the Cross remains offered to all mankind. But this age will someday end.

I see these letters as all written to any church age—particularly our own. It represents to me the 7 failures of a dynamic, empowered, and inspired witness. Not any one church or one person is probably guilty of all 7. More likely: one of these 7 churches in particular profiles the characteristic weakness of a failing witness for each of these reasons.

Are not the candlesticks in Revelation 1:20 references to the churches' witness? And by witness, do we not mean, how they represent the message of the Cross offered to those in spiritual need of that message?

Are there some churches not failing in any of these areas? No doubt. But for the rest of us, here's a thought to consider....

SEVEN LETTERS

Ephesus: Rev. 2:1-7

Ephesus was ardent in her zeal for right. But her vision had changed. She became dogmatic rather than passionate. She lost the humble emphasis, the simplicity, of the message of Calvary and over time proudly trumpeted instead her beliefs now codified in a complex theology. Instead of focusing on Christ and His crucifixion and resurrection, she now saw purpose and meaning in legislating the righteousness of her doctrinal stance.

Smyrna: Rev. 2:8-11

Smyrna was weak. The thought of confrontation frightened her into silence. She could be muzzled by the mere threat of persecution and opposition even though she knew that there has always been a price to pay for promoting the message of Calvary.

Pergamum: Rev. 2:12-17

Pergamum was into cultural acceptance because she welcomed into her company compromising doctrines that made even the most wicked feel at home. The message of a sin-purging, forgiving, salvation was being compromised or set aside for more crowd pleasing messages. The truth was replaced by a powerless theology, endorsed by sinners now made comfortable in the false hope that God requires no change of them.

Thyatira: Rev. 2:18-28

Thyatira compromised practice, not just doctrine. As a witness she was unrecognizable. Her heathen practices contaminated her ritual; it was no longer christian. Notwithstanding the church's humanitarian work, the evil that was welcomed in the Pergamum message was now welcomed in Thyatira's practice.

Sardis: Rev. 3:1-6

Sardis lost her vision in the work of God, her passion for it and failed to complete the mission once started in earnest. The truth was still there but weakened by other interests that seemed to generate more enthusiasm. She seemed bored with the simplicity of "the greatest story ever told." She failed to keep the "Great Commission" relevant as her sole mission in life, to stay on point, to remain focused on what was, in her beginnings, her overwhelming joy to herald.

Philadelphia: Rev. 3:7-13

Philadelphia was easily discouraged and failed to see open doors of opportunity for service to the Lord. This congregation had the message and would do anything the Lord required of them, if only she had the chance. But money was short, workers were few, government

regulations entangling, the needs of those around them overwhelming.

Laodicea: Rev. 3:14-21

Laodicea traded body ministry for corporate enterprise. Success was no longer seen as an expression of her faithfulness to God, to live the message of the Cross. Success was measured in coin, on organizational charts or in property value. She saw the masses but not the individual soul in need.

If you think of it, these are the seven ways our witness and the message of the Cross can be minimized, the way to muffle the Word of Salvation through Christ and we have been warned in the opening words of the Revelator to listen.⁷¹

While we are prone to interpret our sojourn on this earth in terms of dispensations of time, one concept cuts through the confusion to give us a true glimpse into eternity: *no more death*.

NO MORE DEATH

A verse which all Christians, along with Paul, should cherish is Isaiah 25:8 *“He will swallow up death forever.”*⁷² Our interest is in the last word in this verse *“forever”* The Blueletter Bible identifies 36 different uses on the Hebrew word phrase⁷³ that signify a duration of time: *always, forevermore, perpetual*; and the negative: *never*. But exactly what did this verse promise?⁷⁴

⁷¹ Revelations 3:22 “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

⁷² NIV

לְנֶצַח ⁷³

בְּלֵעַ הַמָּוֶת לְנֶצַח ⁷⁴

According to the Septuagint translator: death is not swallowed but *does* the devouring and the word “forever” is translated *mightily*: “Death has swallowed up mightily.”⁷⁵

The NIV along with over a dozen other English translations⁷⁶ flips the meaning and has *God* doing the destroying of death.⁷⁷ It was Paul who read this understanding into this verse—NOT the Septuagint. Paul simply wrote: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”⁷⁸ And Paul decided to translate our word “forever” as “in victory” which is another meaning for this word.

The translation *forever* is unnecessary but the phrase *in victory* echoes Paul’s excitement in writing the Colossians:⁷⁹

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross [in Him].

When death is destroyed, that *IS* forever; for, one characteristic of the eternal is no death or decay.⁸⁰ So, the Scriptures that promise no more death speak more clearly of the hereafter, eternity, than words like “forever.”

Forever is tied to time in the language. It speak of a duration. Say it this way: our understanding is tied to this life. We are far more fluent in explaining the natural than the eternal because, put simply, we are not there yet. It

⁷⁵ κατέπιεν ὁ θάνατος ἰσχύσας

⁷⁶ https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/isa/25/1/t_bibles_704008

⁷⁷ Modern Spanish translates: El Señor [The Lord] destruirá [will destroy] para siempre [forever] la muerte [death], The Vulgate says, Praecipitabit mortem in sempiternum

⁷⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:54 ὁ λόγος ὁ γεγραμμένος κατεπόθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος

⁷⁹ Colossians 2:15 NIV

⁸⁰ 2 Timothy 1:10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

bears repeating that this is where Faith comes in. “*You believe in God, believe also in me,*”⁸¹ Jesus gently exhorts us.

IMMORTALITY

How can we be sure that what is eternal is really eternal?

There is another word used only 3 times in our New Testament that makes all this plain. Time is only useful as a measurement while death reigns, because time measures decay, entropy, the running down and dying of all things. So we look for a non-death or in our language: immortality.

Is God eternal then? You answer this:

*God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.*⁸²

And what about us? Is not this the glorification of the body?

*...those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*⁸³

For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”⁸⁴

In our Old Testament the prophet proclaims, “*He will swallow up death forever.*” [Isaiah 25:8] We don’t need

⁸¹ John 14:1 KJV

⁸² I Timothy 6:14-15

⁸³ Romans 8:30

⁸⁴ I Corinthians 15:53-54

the word “forever” since when death is no more we have entered eternity.

But my favorite verse is something Jesus promised:

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”⁸⁵

It is important, therefore, to understand that what was written, has been written for us *in this life* with only the occasion glimpse ...beyond.

⁸⁵ John 11:25-26

THIS LIFE

The simple truth is that we have no word for the time to come. Bowman concluded, *"The glory of this world is nothing compared to the glory of eternity."*⁸⁶

*... as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" — the things God has prepared for those who love him*⁸⁷

For this reason, believers have a different worldview from non-believers. In "Challenged" I seek to clarify why we, as believers, seem to make no sense to the non-believer:

Civilization now comes with a new perspective, a new worldview,⁸⁸ a different kind of reasoning, an evolutionary approach deemed more scientific, more appropriate for educated minds, than what christians surmised from reading their Bible. Carter Phipps referred to it as "transformative insights of an evolutionary perspective." It is a new way of imagining the past and the future. It comes with a new consciousness. It is known as the new truth, "the broader view."⁸⁹ It is a brand new way of thinking.⁹⁰

Unlike the non-believer's worldview our worldview is directly connected to the primary belief in a

⁸⁶ Bowman, p. 155.

⁸⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:9 NIV

⁸⁸ I found this interesting in the Norwegian TV series "Okkupert" ("Occupied") Season 1, Episode 1. 2015. Prime Minister Jesper Berg (played by Henrik Mestad) explains: *"the world as we created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing the way we think."*

⁸⁹ Carter Phipps. *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea.* (New York:Harper Perennial, 2012), p. 11.

⁹⁰ Challenged, p. 139

loving Creator⁹¹ Who through His Son's death and resurrection, has provided for us a future, an eternity, with Him. Philosophically this is called our *touchstone proposition*:

Every worldview, also, has what philosopher William Halverson called a "touchstone proposition."⁹² For the christian this is the belief in the involvement of an immanent God of Love whose purposefulness and plan makes life a process not an evolution, progressing toward the fulfillment of His promises to us. God sounds reasonable to us.⁹³

Our worldview supports our sojourn through this life, through time, while everything is on the clock, running slowly to a stop called poetically and realistically death.⁹⁴ Think about it: our Bible was not written to describe heaven to us.⁹⁵ The Bible was written to equip us for this spiritual sojourn through this life to live victoriously over sin and follow Christ.⁹⁶ When it comes to the life to come? Jesus reassuringly consoled,

"Do not let your hearts be distressed. You believe in God; trust me...."⁹⁷

⁹¹ Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁹² Carter Phipps. *Evolutionaries: Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea*. (New York:Harper Perennial, 2012), p. 26.

⁹³ Challenged, p. 143

⁹⁴ One word for eternal in Greek is $\alpha\theta\alpha\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$ [transliterated: *athanatos*., no death; compare *euthanasia*].

⁹⁵ Pastor Lenny Evans used to say "The Bible was not written to get us to heaven as much as to get heaven into us."

⁹⁶ 2 Peter 1:3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

⁹⁷ John 14:1

HAPPINESS

When we talk of happiness, we think of heaven, but that was not Jesus' emphasis. We are in "time" now—dealing with death and decay—not eternity where "the rose never dies."⁹⁸ ...and that makes a difference as to how or where we find our source of happiness. Jesus' source was the "Beatitudes" which is the way to happiness in this life – in this world or age. Happiness in the here and now, in time, is a different experience from what we imagine it will be in heaven in eternity where there will be no death, no tears, no pain, no sin.

1. Now, our happiness is tied to our relinquishing everything we have and are for His service, which Jesus goes on to explain, includes a few tears. We will then exchange this all for a tear-free inheritance in the Kingdom of God⁹⁹.
2. Now we mourn as an expression of a deeply meaningful prayer-life—essential to our happiness here, which we will exchange then for an eternal comfort¹⁰⁰.
3. Now our happiness is tied to a passionate desire to sacrifice all to follow Him. We will someday inherit all things that now we have surrendered in His name¹⁰¹.

⁹⁸ *Chorus*

*Just beyond the troubled waters, just beyond the breakers' roar,
Lies the haven where we'll anchor by and by;
'Tis the land beyond the billows, 'tis the calm and peaceful shore,
'Tis the country where the roses never die.*

⁹⁹ Matthew 5:3

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 5:4

¹⁰¹ Matthew 5:5

4. Now nothing gives us more joy than by faith to know Him and share in His calling¹⁰². Then we shall know the happiness of being like Him¹⁰³.
5. Now, our happiness is tied to giving, not receiving, [better to give than receive] but then we will be the beneficiaries¹⁰⁴.
6. Now we eschew evil. We joyfully stand tall in the winds of trials that blow,¹⁰⁵ but then, our lives will be defined by a happiness free from trials¹⁰⁶.
7. Now we seek peace and reconciliation and forgiveness, the forerunners of all happiness here. But then, we shall share in the peaceful unity of God's family¹⁰⁷.
8. We rejoice now to share in His sufferings¹⁰⁸ in our world. Then our happiness will be complete when we are welcomed into His.¹⁰⁹

Unbelievers ridicule the christian approach to happiness because in their understanding happiness has to be connected to pleasure not pain, amusement not grief, etc. Ultimately our happiness hinges on a sense that we have a share in the kingdom of God because we have a share in His sufferings. And suffering does not have to approach martyrdom or some heroic spiritual act. It suffices that we are mocked and laughed at for our faith. Unbelievers imagine a painfree, poverty-free utopia that they anticipate will come through a social/psychological/

¹⁰² Philippians 3:10

¹⁰³ Matthew 5:6

¹⁰⁴ Matthew 5:7

¹⁰⁵ Ephesians 6:14

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 5:8

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 5:9

¹⁰⁸ Philippians 3:10

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 5:10-12

medical/technical evolution. Hedonism provides a relief from the bad times until then.

As believers, we have a worldview that best fits this present age to help us find the eye of the storm. We realize that eternity is not going to be the result of evolutionary change—nor indeed could it be. Evolution is anchored to time. Eternity is outside time.

You may throw away your wristwatches, your clocks and time pieces when you get there! Suffering along with death will be no more and we will no longer require the means to measure age.

...But...for some there is prophesied another “eternity.”

JUDGMENT

I have been told by some non-believers that God is a dictator, demanding worship, instead of allowing each one to live their own life in peace. "Requiring so much church through fear of divine retribution," they say, "motivates otherwise independent thinkers to go through the motions, the rituals, without any serious desire otherwise to be there." He is a vengeful God, according to some non-believers.

They do not sense there is something else happening here within the sanctuary walls. *Acting in God's interests serves our own!*

*Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. - Psalm 37:4*¹¹⁰

Many interpret this verse to mean that if we appease God, He will answer our prayers. "Delight in Him then He will give..." This works grammatically but for two reasons, I reject this interpretation:

- ◆ This is showing favor which every believer knows is *not* what grace is about. To say "delight in the Lord because then He will answer your desires" should be challenged, if for no other reason, on theological grounds.
- ◆ The word *delight* means to "take exquisite delight."¹¹¹ A believer in worship is "*all in*" not because they have been pressured or brain washed but because it is intrinsically and essentially who

¹¹⁰ וְהִתְעַנַּג עַל־יְהוָה וַיִּתְּן־לְךָ מִשְׂאֵלֶת לֶבְבְּךָ:

¹¹¹ The verb is in the hithpael or reflexive: delight YOURSELF. vs 11 But the meek will inherit the land and **enjoy** peace and prosperity. The noun form means luxury, exquisite delight, dainties. [BDB. p. 772.]

they are in Christ.. Each believer enjoys¹¹² this unfettered excitement. It is not forced—their motivation is not fear. ...nor indeed could be!

The word “and” here in Hebrew connects a simple narrative: this speaks to a mutual relationship between a believer and God. Both God and the believer are finding the relationship mutually rewarding.¹¹³ It is not causal but mutual. We might turn the above mantra about: *Our interests (as worshippers) serve God's*. Don't misread this verse. Believers are not worshipping God because it is *in* their best interest. ...It *is* their best interest.

This is perhaps a strange introduction to “punishment” [or “retribution”] but the issue here is: This is a private matter between two consenting and sentient beings: God and one other, but some have chosen *not* to delight in Him but rather treat His name and what it represents with contumely.

There are some who in ignorance or having been misinformed fail to discover this message of Grace while they live in a spiritually impoverished cultural setting. The argument of unfairness alleged against God (sending these to an eternal torment undeserved and unannounced) has caught the attention of the non-believing philosopher. “All those innocent Kenyans who had no idea this life would end in torture.” They conclude. Some theologians,

¹¹² Charles Spurgeon correctly comments, “our soul should be as glad as is the epicure who feeds delicately with a profound relish for his dainties.” vol. I. p. 673

¹¹³ I have maintained in my studies of the Hebrew language in our Old Testament that God's reason for choosing this language here was because of its emphasis on relational concepts. Hebrew is less abstract than Greek, or English. The language supports human expressions, feelings, and thoughts in a non-technical way which helps to register God's concern about His broken relationship with His creation.

in error, assume these must be saved deducing that there must be more than one path to God—not just believing in the Savior. We know this to be unscriptural.¹¹⁴

Our Lord has commissioned us with the message of the Cross which is our calling “in time.” Reasoning outside time or to whom God might or might not show mercy,¹¹⁵ how He may manage His Book of life in eternity, is beyond the scope of our ministry and understanding. The non-believer’s line of reason is an attempt at understanding God. Our interest is in trusting Him.¹¹⁶

I am more concerned here about those who have heard, considered the message and, as Paul lamented *“trampled the Son of God underfoot, treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant, and insulted the Spirit of grace.”* [We’ve yet to look at what Paul means by this..]

A FEW CONCERNS

As you detect in my tone: I have some concerns about these matters. They involve family—probably for most of us. And it is my interest to turn over every rock, investigate every phrase, research every term, and prayerfully seek God’s wisdom before resigning myself to the meaning of “eternal punishment.” What appears obvious in scripture may not be so when we begin to study a text more closely in its context. This might be the case

¹¹⁴ Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

¹¹⁵ Exodus 3:19 And the LORD said, “...I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

¹¹⁶ John 21:22 Jesus answered, “... what is that to you? You must follow me.”

with Matthew's recollection when Jesus spoke of "eternal punishment."

- ◆ The word "eternal" itself—as already noted in this study—is linguistically a weak term if we are talking about a *timeless* and *endless* punishment.
- ◆ The word "punishment" carries the idea of correction not retribution. How can there be endless correction?
- ◆ Gehenna, the place outside Jerusalem symbolized divine judgment, but might it, in theological error, be taken—let me say in a colloquial way—*too* literally.
 - *Eternal flames* as a description does not work with the symbol in James where he describes hurtful words spoken by a tongue "*set on fire by hell*¹¹⁷ [Gehenna]"?
 - Literal flames endlessly lapping at the naked forms of the "lost" perhaps is too literal for an Old Testament symbolism spoken of by Jeremiah¹¹⁸. For him it spoke of slaughter. Jesus referenced this location in a cultural setting as a symbol of divine judgment. (*Fire* symbolized *judgment*). Is there a sense in which this is *final* as opposed to endless?

¹¹⁷ James 3:6 φλογιζομενη υπο της γεεννης

¹¹⁸ Jeremiah 7:31-32 They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.

- Only the synoptic gospels mention “Gehenna” Paul never uses the symbolism since his ministry was to the Gentiles. Paul spoke of judgment¹¹⁹ but not “eternal or unending judgment.”¹²⁰ Is it not possible that Gehenna symbolized the judgment of God for *Israel*—a symbol they would understand and hopefully take to heart. They would not have imagined live people thrown into flames.
- How should we interpret the word “destruction” in Peter’s prophesy: the day of judgment and destruction¹²¹ of the ungodly.^{122?} How is this endless?

[The judgment seat of Christ¹²³ and the judgment of God¹²⁴ should be frightening inevitabilities regardless the symbolism. Whatever meanings we ascribe to the terms

¹¹⁹ Acts 24:25 As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid....

Romans 2:2, 3, &5 Now we know that God's judgment ...is based on truth. do you think you will escape God's judgment? the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

¹²⁰ The one exception is in Hebrews 6:2 in the list of subjects young Jewish believers should be taught.

¹²¹ The dictionary entry in the Blueletter Bible adds: *the destruction which consists of eternal misery in hell*

A general perusal of the use of the term suggests “a wasted life” or “ruin” or “render useless” It is presumed a derivative of the word “perish” in John 3:16.

¹²² 2 Peter 3:7 εις ημεραν κρισεως και απωλειας των ασεβων ανθρωπων

¹²³ 2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

¹²⁴ Romans 1:32 KJV Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

used, we should not tone down the emphasis of this truth or provide a false hope to the listeners who need to take God seriously. There is no pain or nightmare in this life that approaches the horror of being rejected by God when He selects others to enter into His joy.^{125]}

PUNISHMENT

According to Peter, there are the godly and the ungodly. The godly God delivers from temptations. But *“The Lord knows how to ... hold the ungodly for punishment on the day of judgment.”*¹²⁶ The Lord knows how to keep under guard those awaiting a day of judgment when they shall be punished.¹²⁷

Some scholars believe that life in this world for the evil doer is the beginning of their punishment because this world is overladen with misfortune, grief, and death ... and they do not have the believer's recourse to peace in Christ. In this regard I John 4:18 might be significant, *“Fear contains punishment in itself.”* The man who lives in fear (before God) is already punished by this fear.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Matthew 25:23 Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!

¹²⁶ 2 Peter 2:9

¹²⁷ I struggled with this phrase, as had others. The word punished is a present passive participle in the predicate position showing (attending circumstance). “The action of the participle of attendant circumstance may precede the action of the principal verb, accompany it, or even follow it. But as respects a logical relation, it is presented merely as an accompaniment of the action of the verb.” - Ernest Dewitt Burton, “Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek.” P. 174.

¹²⁸ Kittell vol III. p 817.

Peter is saying that the judgment is to be understood as meting out punishment.¹²⁹ But what is “punishment”?

Clement

Clement, one of the early church fathers, sounds a bit like Peter:

For his hospitality and godliness Lot was saved from Sodom, when all the country round about was judged by fire and brimstone; the Master having thus fore shown that He forsaketh not them which set their hope on Him, but appointeth unto punishment and torment¹³⁰ them which swerve aside.

Discipline or Vengeance?

The word *punishment* in the Greek became the word for “hell” or Gehenna.¹³¹ But it had a humbler beginning—as words go. “The meaning originally was ‘to cut short’ ... [to prune, cut off, curtail]¹³² ... ,” Scholarship informs us. This word was used to describe trimming (a grape arbor), lopping off (an appendage) and eventually gained the figurative meanings of “to impede, ...to punish. “ (In a sense, one’s future hopes have been “cut short.”) “...of course this may be a derived sense,” my source continues, “but in any case it is clearly a familiar sense during

¹²⁹ This is similar to Jude 6 which speaks of the fallen angels: And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.

¹³⁰ 1Clement 11:1. εις κολασιν [punishment] και αικισμον [insulting treatment, outrage]

¹³¹ In the Apocryphal of Peter the place of κολασις is hell Already in the Byzantine period κολασις equals γεεννα [gehenna, hell]

¹³² κολουω

the New Testament period, and we cannot leave it out of consideration when we examine this very important word."¹³³

In non-biblical literature, punishment was corrective, disciplinary.¹³⁴ Herodotus wrote: "God loves to abase all those who are exalted." "Abase" is our word "punish."

But eventually "punishment went punitive ... retributive ...vengeful! Within scripture it has been called retributive—I think—to support a fundamental eschatology about the end of the ungodly. In either case, it's dreadfully tortuous.¹³⁵

Clement of Alexandria wrote:

For there are partial corrections, which are called chastisements, which many of us who have been in transgression incur, by falling away from the Lord's people.

¹³³ [from non literary sources] taken from Fayum Towns and their Papyri, London 1900. [C. 100 AD.] "please send me two forks ... as I am feeling the want [κολαζομαι] of them." - Moulton and Milligan "The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament" p. 352

¹³⁴ Κολασις "has reference to correction and bettering the offender" Trench p.24.

On κολουω: like **κολαζω**, which is more frequent in Prose [Greek-English Lexicon, Liddell & Scott], φιλέει γὰρ ὁ θεὸς τὰ ὑπερέχοντα πάντα κολούειν.. For God loves to abase all those who are exalted. Herodotus 7.10E.1 "The Histories"

¹³⁵ 2 Clement 17,7 *punished with dreadful tortures in unquenchable fire* [Κολαζονται δειναις βασανοις πυρι ασβεστω]

4 Maccabees 8:9 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) But if by disobedience you rouse my anger, you will compel me to destroy each and every one of you with dreadful punishments [Δειναις κολασεις] through tortures.

2 Maccabees 4:38 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Inflamed with anger, he immediately stripped off the purple robe from Andronicus, tore off his clothes, and led him around the whole city to that very place where he had committed the outrage against Onias, and there he dispatched the bloodthirsty fellow. The Lord thus repaid him with the punishment he deserved. [Κυριου την αξιαν αυτω κολασις αποδοντος.]

*But as children are chastised by their teacher, or their father, so are we by Providence. But God does not punish, for punishment is retaliation for evil. He chastises, however, for good to those who are chastised, collectively and individually.*¹³⁶

“Punishment” went from *chastisement*¹³⁷ to *retribution*¹³⁸ because it lost its use as a corrective force and became more a final solution. But another distinction was noted by Aristotle:

Outraged Justice or Correction

*[There is a] difference between retribution and punishment. To explain: on the one hand punishment regards the sufferer (the person being punished). But retribution fulfills the one doing it (the punisher).*¹³⁹

Retribution becomes a form of “punishment as a satisfaction [appeasement] for the inflicter’s sense of outraged justice, as defending his own honor, or that of the violated law.¹⁴⁰ For God, punishment is in defense of the honor of His holiness which has gone unrequited since Eden. It has been too long since all creation bowed before Him, not through some coercive force but willingly, joyously, and thankfully. The Psalmist is correct:

¹³⁶ c. 182 AD *Stromata* (Misc.) see <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book7.html>

¹³⁷ μερικαι παιδεια

¹³⁸ It has been compared to: Τιμωρια === κακου ανταποδοσις (to reward evil)

¹³⁹ See Aristotle *Rhetoric* I.10 διαφερει δε τιμωρια και κολασις. Μεν γαρ κολασις του πασχοντος ενεκα εστιν. Η δε τιμωρια του ποιουντος, ινα αποπληρωθη.

¹⁴⁰ Trench, p. 24.

*Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.*¹⁴¹

A Parable

The question of torment (which we look at later) is addressed in our word *punishment*. It will be no picnic. There will be no comparison with the sufferings of this life which will seem in contrast like a “walk in the park.” The Bible employs the word torture (torment) in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

*...for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.*¹⁴²

- ◆ Judgment need not be endless in the sense of torment as much as it has to bring about the finality to sin. Could not the language speak of an “age” or “time” of judgment?
- ◆ Punishment is retributive but not because retribution is cruel or because punishment has to be characterized by a personal vendetta. Punishment is corrective in the sense that God will thereby bring about an end to sin and a restoration of all things as He promised.¹⁴³

A parable is not meant to answer all our questions but are we short changing the significance of this one? I will leave this for the preacher

¹⁴¹ Psalm 96:9

¹⁴² Lk 16:28 τὸν τόπον τοῦτον τῆς βασιάνου

¹⁴³ Acts 3:21 Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.

Richard Trench

The following quote has a few Greek words in it. Skip to the English translation. Richard Trench sees punishment as *retributive*:

It would be quite erroneous, however, to transfer that distinction in its entirety to the New Testament use of τιμωρια [retribution] and κολασις [punishment]. The κολασις αιωνος [everlasting punishment] of Matthew 25:46 is not merely corrective and therefore temporary discipline but rather the αθανατος [no death] τιμωρια [retribution - i.e. eternal vengeance], [this is] the αιδιοι τιμωριαι¹⁴⁴ [everlasting vengeance], with which the Lord elsewhere threatens finally impenitent men (Mark 9:43-48).¹⁴⁵

“...where the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

DISCIPLINE OR VENGEANCE

The best example for this word “punishment” is parental disciplinary action. When a parent chastises their own child, they may be furious, filled with unanswered rage or hurt but the focus is not on their feelings but their child’s correction. The parent needs to find the way to bring an end to some bad behavior which, if left unaddressed, would eventually lead their child into harms way or worse.

With God, His creation needs correction. Daniel’s vision¹⁴⁶ in which God promises to bring an end to sin, is corrective in scope. Paul agrees,¹⁴⁷ Punishment—not

¹⁴⁴ Josephus, B. J. li. 8. 11

¹⁴⁵ Trench. Synonyms of the New Testament on κολασις, τιμωρια

¹⁴⁶ Daniel 9:24 to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness,

¹⁴⁷ Hebrews 9:26 But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

revenge—is God involved with His creation to usher in the “ages to come,” a day of grace, when He is free to continue the relationship He originally envisioned in Eden.

But the language of Hebrews 10:29 seems exceptionally harsh:

How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished

1. *who has trampled the Son of God underfoot,*
2. *who has treated [or deliberately judged] as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and*
3. *who has insulted the Spirit of grace?*

In this verse, the word “punished” should be translated “vengeance.”¹⁴⁸ (A more severe *punishment* would be saying that God’s efforts in this case would be more extreme, but that, I believe, is not the writer's point.) The writer, Paul[?], uses the word for *vengeance*.¹⁴⁹ Vengeance changes the motive to an expression of rage because this word draws attention to the punisher and their desire to appease their injury or offense. This fits the context, the nuance. A world of hostility or indifference to His Son’s death is a grieving offense to God! This verse is not about judgment but more about the burden God and His saints carry for His creation concerning His Son’s death on Calvary.

Paul clarified what He meant here in verses 26 & 27:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

¹⁴⁸ The Biblical words for *vengeance* applied to the heart of God should not be confused with our term in the English and the nuances that surround the human heart. This is a separate study.

¹⁴⁹ τιμωρια

In other words because Christ has come and died on Calvary there is no other provision for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Paul's reader here was Jewish. Paul was saying that to continue to rely upon the Old Testament offerings would be a serious mistake since these offerings are no longer meaningful. To continue to depend upon the Old Testament economy and religiously follow Old Testament ceremonial law would be comparable to trampling the Son of God, who hung there for sin, underfoot, treating Calvary as the death of a common man, and belittling the grace of God that was offered there in His Son. This was all about God's Son not final judgment.

The ungodly are not paying for their sins—for indeed, they cannot afford to. Jesus did that on Calvary.¹⁵⁰ The punishment spoken of in Scripture is focused—not on the rage (wrath) which God clearly feels¹⁵¹ but on the removing of sin. God's focus is not on beating up His creation, but of ushering in a new day of Grace where sin does not exist.

The writer is using explosive language—using the word for vengeance and not discipline—to shock his Jewish brethren into rethinking what really happened on Golgotha's hill. (God's motive is to end sin.) This verse in Hebrews reminds us of the emotion that burdens the preacherand God.

Nowhere else in our New Testament is this word for vengeance used. But, to me, the value of this word

¹⁵⁰ I John 2:2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

¹⁵¹ Romans 9:22 What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?

Revelation 6:17 For the great day of their [His] wrath has come, and who can withstand it?

here is key to understanding the divine burden that should drive us to live the purest witness for God and to honor with our lives what His Son provided on the Cross.

HOLINESS

Sin is anything in the heart or nature or character that is not in harmony with the holiness of God. In my book on prayer I wrote:

Holiness is not just an idea, then, or a life free from a list of vices we have determined are vices. Holiness is not a religious term as if we can claim to be holy because we are going to church weekly, or giving money to the church or have not said a bad word in over a year. There is no law of holiness.¹⁵²

Holiness is the divine person; it is how God acts and thinks and works. As scholarship concluded:

KODESH [holiness] comes to have the meaning of divine, and thus becomes an adjective for God.¹⁵³

God's offense was more than a feeling. His creation's rejection of His leadership and love, man's unfaithfulness and interest in idols, offended His holiness, who He was and wanted to be toward them. His was an unrequited love, an injured zeal to build them a future filled with all the gifts He could provide them and they rejected Him and them. We should be able to understand God's interest in judgment (a punishment) to bring them back to Him, to give them a heart that could appreciate and return His love. He was like a scorned spouse or a parent whose child who once was close¹⁵⁴ was now estranged.

¹⁵² Galatians 5:23 says of the Fruit of the Spirit: "*Against such things there is no law.*"

¹⁵³ Kittell vol I. p. 90

¹⁵⁴ Hosea 11:1 When Israel was a child, I loved him

But does this warrant a term like *Gehenna*!

GEHENNA

Gehenna is the Valley of Ben Hinnom just outside Jerusalem where the citizens of Jerusalem discarded their trash and garbage. In Ancient times children were sacrificed there to heathen idols.¹⁵⁵ It even became known as a familiar location to dispose of the dead.¹⁵⁶ Gehenna became the symbol, a metaphor, for *hell*—not the grave, but—a place of fire that was prepared for Satan and his cohorts¹⁵⁷ and also the unrepentant, non-believers who rejected God’s invitation into His heaven.¹⁵⁸

Jesus was the primary source of this symbolism which should give us pause as to its veracity. I doubt that the few references to Gehenna¹⁵⁹ by the Savior exhausts the list of offenses that deserves such a place. (I don’t think

¹⁵⁵ Jeremiah 32:35 They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molek, though I never commanded—nor did it enter my mind—that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.

¹⁵⁶ Jeremiah 7:32 So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.

¹⁵⁷ Matthew 25:41 Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

¹⁵⁸ Romans 2:8-9 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile;

¹⁵⁹ The first century A.D. The term Gehenna was further extended to cover the place where the ungodly were punished in the intermediate state ... but this is not so in the New Testament. - Kittell Vol I Page 658

that was the Savior's point.) Jesus offered examples¹⁶⁰ in order to give Israel in His day a sense of the horror of such a place, such a future, absent God's loving presence and grace. Some of the Savior's examples must have been shocking beyond belief! The severity of the judgment of God on sin is expressed by Jesus even to the disciples who wound their brothers with contemptuous words.¹⁶¹

The sole reason, in point of theological fact, for ending up there is having rejected God's offer to join Him in His world; there is no other place to go.¹⁶²

*They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*¹⁶³

Gehenna is also known as a lake of fire where those who pass on the Holy Spirit's invite to accept what Jesus did on Calvary for their salvation are tossed along with Satan.¹⁶⁴ But here, too, is the final place of death, designating this lake as "the second death."¹⁶⁵ Gehenna or the "Lake of Fire" should alert in us a sense of horror that

¹⁶⁰ Mark 9:47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, 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,

¹⁶¹ Matthew 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

¹⁶² Matthew 12:31 And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

John 16:8 When he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment:

¹⁶³ 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10

¹⁶⁴ Revelation 20:15 Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

¹⁶⁵ Revelation 20:14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

despite the symbolism should lead us all to repentance and to God. But, alas, this didn't and doesn't happen. So here we are examining this metaphor.

FIRE!

Throughout the Scriptures the execution of judgment is frequently portrayed with the images of burning.¹⁶⁶ Throughout the prophetic books God's judgment on both the wicked nations and Israel's disobedience is referred to in these terms¹⁶⁷ By using the symbol of judgment by fire, the biblical writers communicate to their readers that the judgment is catastrophic and final, and that it satisfies the requirements of God's holiness.¹⁶⁸

In Biblical symbolism fire burns away whatever can be consumed by the flames. Anyone who has a self-cleaning oven must know how this works. Spiritually speaking, the fire of trials purifies the faith of a believer to trust God even more faithfully.¹⁶⁹

A Day of final judgment provides the same imagery for everyone who has ever lived. All will pass through the flames (symbolically speaking) of God's Truth

¹⁶⁶ Dictionary of Biblical Imager p. 377

¹⁶⁷ Isaiah 1:25 I will turn my hand against you; [Jerusalem] I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities.

Isaiah 7:4 Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.

¹⁶⁸ Hebrews 12:29 or our "God is a consuming fire." Deuteronomy 4:24

¹⁶⁹ I Peter 1:7 These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Revelation 3:18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become [spiritually] rich [in God].

to reveal what is hidden in the heart or lost to memory of the life each lived.¹⁷⁰

*... their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.*¹⁷¹

Many Bible scholars see some literalism here because this happens after the resurrection of all souls when, it is believed, new and immortal bodies will be given us all. This means that the horror we are not describing here (because it defies imagination) is experienced by the body AND soul of the unrepentant. In Gehenna both body and soul, reunited at the Resurrection, are destroyed by eternal fire.¹⁷²

*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.*¹⁷³

I personally have no trouble believing that had Jesus walked among us in our current cultural settings, He would have referenced other parabolic examples in His teaching—examples that would have spoken more directly to us about the seriousness of rejecting His offer of salvation. Maybe a volcano would have been in His illustrations or maybe He would have referenced a nuclear explosion. But the undeniable word of warning here is The Judgment of God.

¹⁷⁰ The most talked about parable of Jesus in this regard is The parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

¹⁷¹ 1 Corinthians 3:13-15

¹⁷² Kittell Vol I p. 657-8

¹⁷³ Matthew 10:28

But judgment and punishment understandably speak of torment.

TORMENT

Torture or torment¹⁷⁴ is defined in Matthew 8:6 as “suffering terribly” or in “terrible pain.”¹⁷⁵ The term “torture” applies to Satan’s lot.¹⁷⁶ In the gospels demons are tormented or looking ahead to it.¹⁷⁷ Obviously this life comes with some trials for Jesus’ followers. But these are not of interest here. The question before us is: are the ungodly to experience endless torment at the hands of God!?

Only a single reference speaks of torment as unending.¹⁷⁸

*And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever.¹⁷⁹
There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the
beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its
name.”¹⁸⁰*

This verse leaves me with questions that suggest it might be a reference to the tribulation period or at least it begins here:

¹⁷⁴ A corresponding basis in the Hebrew is lacking in almost every case. -Kittell vol I. p. 562

¹⁷⁵ It has been compared to labor pains.

¹⁷⁶ Revelation 20:10 And the devil, who deceived them, 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.

¹⁷⁷ Matthew 8:29 “What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?”

¹⁷⁸ Revelation 9:5 prophecies 5 months of pain which is called the 1st woe during the 5th trumpet.

¹⁷⁹ ...the idea of eternal punishment is pictured by a column of smoke rising from hell forever - Kittell, p. 364

¹⁸⁰ Revelation 14:11

- ◆ They are worshippers of the beast. This would be unlikely to continue while being tortured.
- ◆ “Day or Night” suggests “in time” not eternity.

Compare the biblical reference to the cities of the plain: Sodom and Gomorrah’s punishment was said to be *eternal* even though we know the cities were destroyed utterly. God’s judgment was “eternal” in the sense of *final*; the cities were never rebuilt.

*In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.*¹⁸¹

The two primary portions of scripture that refer to the non-believers are the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and the Revelation.

A Summary

- ◆ The parable of Lazarus and the Rich man¹⁸²

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores¹⁸³

The rich man and Lazarus is a story taken from Egyptian mythology, complements of its Jewish caretakers during the Roman occupation of Palestine. The Egyptians gave the rich man a name, ‘*Nineveh*,’ changed to Phineas after the Phineas in scripture.¹⁸⁴ How much of this story should be literal? What was Jesus’ point or emphasis in using it? This story rolls back the curtain on a life pre-

¹⁸¹ Jude 7

¹⁸² Luke 16:23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

¹⁸³ Luke 16:19-20

¹⁸⁴ Numbers 25:7 When Phineas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand NIV

Calvary. We have to ask, what is the value to Christian theology beyond the immediate importance of Jesus' warning to His Jewish audience in His day?

◆ The Book of Revelation¹⁸⁵

*"Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life"*¹⁸⁶ is to be thrown into the lake of fire. This is called "the second death."

Is it possible the second means second time? First time in a mortal body; second time in a resurrected form—but a death nonetheless?

I want to believe this means that God's judgment on that day will be final, as final and as complete as when Jesus cried on Calvary, "It's finished." Aside from a reasonable call for divine justice, does scripture support the idea that the torment of hell is forever or—as I want to believe—could God's judgment or His sentence passed on the ungodly be final in the sense of once and for all and which cannot be repealed, rather than the outraged fury of God's anger, unleashed, unabated, and unending? We are describing a **period** of judgment, *punishment*, in the form of a divine response to man's wickedness—a time of judgment that ends but its result, God's decision in this matter, is final. We often hear that God hates the sin but loves the sinner; so, if punishment is retributive to remove the *sin*, could the fire and the second death be the final disposition in time in dealing with sin? And what about the sinner here? I am not suggesting either annihilation or a universal salvation, nor that somehow this is an

¹⁸⁵ Revelation 9:5 the 1st woe, the 5th trumpet. They were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes.

¹⁸⁶ Revelation 20:15.

extension of the idea of purgatory. The possibility for a final divine retributive judgment to roll back the “fall” should not negate the warning or make the punishment of less Biblical significance. It is all God says it is—torturous!

Dr. Robert A. Peterson¹⁸⁷ presents the evangelical argument:

*I regard these arguments for annihilationism ... as rewriting the biblical story, something we have no right to do. I say this because the Bible's final three chapters present the eternal state of affairs. The resurrected saints will be blessed with God's eternal presence on the new earth (Rev. 21:1–4). And, interestingly for our present discussion, each of Scripture's final three chapters presents the fate of the unsaved.*¹⁸⁸

We might ask instead “Will the ungodly die or live forever? According to the Revelator:

*But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.*¹⁸⁹

And what does “sulfur” signify if not a reference to Sodom’s destruction in Genesis

And if the sinner is alive forever, will they be tortured forever as a divine retribution or will they be tormented by an acute and terrifying awareness of God’s absence (Will they be left alive in a “hell” of their own making)?

DESTROYED?

¹⁸⁷ professor of systematic theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He is author of *Hell on Trial*, coauthor of *Two Views of Hell*, and coeditor of *Hell Under Fire*.

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/annihilation-or-eternal-punishment/>

¹⁸⁹ *Revelation 21:8*

The one remaining detail on which I wish I could come to a conclusion is the idea of *destruction*. In Jesus' comments to His disciples in His well-known "Sermon on the Mount" He warned,

*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.*¹⁹⁰

Is the reference to the undying worm relevant here? Jesus explains, "*the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.*"¹⁹¹ This is the only New Testament reference to the eternal worm where Jesus quotes Isaiah 66:24. After the promise of a new heaven and a new earth,¹⁹² after "*his rebuke with flames of fire,*"¹⁹³ the Lord proclaims:

"And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."

Jesus offered this instruction that instead of looking at porn or living a grieving envy because others seem more blessed (whatever according to 1 John 2:16 we might call "*the lust of the eye*") remove your eye and wear a patch to heaven rather than end this life to be tossed unto the garbage heap in the Valley of Hinnom. Hungry worms there never get enough!

Is the undying worm a reference to eternal punishment? One can entertain some doubt since it has a distinct Old Testament, ancient Israel, semitic "ring" to it. But the destruction Jesus warned about should be part of this conversation.

¹⁹⁰ Matthew 7:13

¹⁹¹ Mark 9:48

¹⁹² Isaiah 66:22

¹⁹³ Isaiah 66:15

There are four meanings for the word *destruction* offered us:¹⁹⁴

1. To kill¹⁹⁵
2. To lose something or suffer lose¹⁹⁶
3. To perish¹⁹⁷
4. To be lost:
 - the lost sheep¹⁹⁸
 - The lost coin¹⁹⁹
 - The lost son²⁰⁰

Scholarship laments the fact that “*It is impossible to trace back the figurative use to any one of the meanings listed.*”²⁰¹

We should note Mark 8:35 “*For whoever wants to save their life will **lose** it, but whoever **loses** their life for me and for the gospel will save it.*” Here “*to lose one’s soul*” after a Hebrew expression means “*to trifle away one’s life.*” The next verse, 36, “*What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet **forfeit** their soul?*” uses the stronger word

¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁵ Matthew 27:20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus **executed**.

¹⁹⁶ Mark 9:41 Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not **lose** their reward.

¹⁹⁷ Mark 4:38 Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we **drown?**”

¹⁹⁸ Luke 15:6 Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’

¹⁹⁹ Luke 9:15 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’

²⁰⁰ Luke 15:32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

²⁰¹ Kittell vol I. p. 394.

emphasizing “the fateful consequences,”²⁰² i.e. Eternal consequences.

A lost life by idiom means a wasted life and this is one definition (#4 above) of the word *destruction*.

If the soul is said to be “lost” is it destroyed? In endless torment? Or should we derive some insight from Paul’s comment to the Thessalonians and say that this is lost opportunity to be spending forevermore in the Lord’s presence and experiencing the eternal benefits of His glorious benevolence!?²⁰³

*They will be punished with everlasting **destruction** and **shut out from the presence of the Lord** and from the glory of his **might***²⁰⁴

And what dare we make of I Corinthians 8:11 “So *this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is **destroyed** by your knowledge.*” Can a believer who struggles in his or her faith with what they should or should not do, what they should and should not accept for divine truth, lose their soul over the reaction of another person within the church?! We should not try to file down the sharpness of this rebuke with rationalizations. We should be humble, considerate, reasonable, and loving, encouraging and supportive especially of those whose faith is tender and young.

²⁰² *ibid.* p. 365

²⁰³ In contrast to eternal life, this destruction is definitive...,not merely in the sense of the extinction of physical existence. but rather of an eternal plunge into Hades and a hopeless destiny of death in the depiction of which such terms as, wrath, rage, tribulation. and grief are used.” - *ibid.* p. 396

²⁰⁴ 2 Thessalonians 1:9 the word *destruction* ὀλεθρος here is closer to the word “death” after O.T. usage. The verb is found 18 times in the O.T. often for “cut off” or perish כרת

Acts 3:23 Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.

Other than that, our souls are ultimately in His hands.²⁰⁵

I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.- 2 Timothy 1:12

²⁰⁵ James 4:12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy...

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

CONCLUSIONS

The day after time will be for believers the first day of grace extending timelessly uninterrupted forevermore. They will not be surprised having been blessed with the Spirit of God in their lives “in time” introducing to them heavenly things.²⁰⁶ But the extent of God’s benevolence now in the absence of evil will require their glorification,²⁰⁷ new bodies,²⁰⁸ to be able to take it all in.

Life for the believer is eternal.²⁰⁹ We didn’t need human language to tell us this. God is eternal and God has rescued His people from this evil age to have a relationship with them. They have to live forever as well.²¹⁰ Their resurrection will be like Christ’s. He was first.²¹¹ All this is plain in Scripture.²¹²

²⁰⁶ John 16:13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

²⁰⁷ Romans 8:30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

²⁰⁸ I Corinthians 15:53-54 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.

²⁰⁹ The KJV shows 30 references in the New Testament to “eternal life” or “life eternal.” It is impossible for me to take this any other way.

²¹⁰ I Corinthians 15:26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Revelation 21:4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying.

Isaiah 25:8 he will swallow up death forever.

²¹¹ I Corinthians 15:20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

²¹² Ephesians 2:6-7 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the

It is the non-believer that has concerned me in this pamphlet. My personal belief carries no more insight into this truth than any other's but we should all independently own a conviction in these matters. Here is mine.

Am I asked to believe that there is a literal fire in which all non-believers will burn continuously, time unending, only after God gives them resurrected bodies²¹³ that can feel the flames and only after they are forced to recognize Jesus as Lord?²¹⁴ For two reasons I cannot.

1. I do not find that the language requires a belief in a never ending divine torture. The key terms: *eternal*, *destruction*, and *punishment* can have a meaning and a nuance that support an alternative view.

In Matthew 25:46 "eternal punishment" to me signifies a period of time in which the Judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25) will hold court one final time to recognize each life, one by one.²¹⁵ And His judgment will be final (eternal). There will be no appeal because this is the highest court. This is more than a sentence on what each

coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

²¹³ John 5:29 those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

²¹⁴ Philippians 2:10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

²¹⁵ Matthew 25:32-33 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Matthew 16:27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

one did but what each one thought and the condition of each heart.²¹⁶ There is no fear for the believer²¹⁷ but for the non-believer it is a painful gathering.²¹⁸

Hell—or if you want: use the term, *Gehenna*—is real. It symbolizes God’s rejection. I think Paul said it best.

*They will be ...shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.*²¹⁹

I do not know what the non-believer’s eternity will be like (without God) nor more than is it clear what the believer’s will be like (with Him).

If I am proud of anything personal, it is that I shun presumptuousness.²²⁰ I am first to recognize my ignorance on these matters. But is it possible that there are many believers who have rethought some of the eschatology taught us over the years? This is the eternal, timeless, never ending heaven and hell we are talking about!

²¹⁶ Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

²¹⁷ 1 John 4:18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation [sentence] for those who are in Christ Jesus,

²¹⁸ Isaiah 13:6-9 Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. Because of this, all hands will go limp, every heart will melt with fear. Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame. See, the day of the LORD is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.

²¹⁹ 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10

²²⁰ 2 Peter 1:20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things.

I am reluctant to maintain that hell has a limit and that the non-believer will simply cease to exist since the soul is eternal. But the “flames” or fire are symbols of the judgment of God. I have a biblical right to believe that this is symbolic and that this begins during the final tribulation period. God’s punishment is His final judgment. The punishment that never ends is God’s absence—His love, peace and grace no longer a part of their life. This is the non-believer’s doing *not* God’s.

In Revelation 14:11 *the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever* may symbolize the tortuous realization that their allegiance to evil²²¹ and their unrepentant hearts²²² have separated them forever from everything God was for His creation. Their godless utopia was a vacuous dream, an ephemeral hope.

Fallen man has chosen his end. Yes, it is a time for God’s wrath. The vials are soon to be poured out according to the Revelator. The final stage is set for God to clear His docket and hold court. Regarding God’s children, Revelation 14:4 is enlightening. Believers are called virgins.²²³ Of course! ...the Bride of Christ! But the world is apostate, an unfaithful creation in an affair with Jezebel, the great patroness of idolaters and false prophets and this is their final act.

2. I cannot believe that I would be more merciful than the God in whose image I am made. And I cannot

²²¹ Revelation 13:1 And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

²²² Revelation 16:11 and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

²²³ These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins.

imagine endless torment for anyone but Satan and the fallen angels.

Matthew 25:31-41 might suggest otherwise. Verse 41 assigns whoever is described in this context to *“the eternal fire.”*

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?

40 “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

But, again, fire speaks of judgment—common and well-accepted theological knowledge. The reference is to sheep and goats which makes this a parabolic teaching for Jesus’ audience of Judeans. In this story Jesus assigns to the fire all those who have failed to feed or clothe the poor, visit the imprisoned, care for the sick, and entertain the

stranger. This seems harsh! ..don't you think? What is the Savior saying!?

My answer: He is speaking, again, to Judeans, to a people who can appreciate a salvation of works, a people who, Paul found out, misunderstood the concept of divine grace.²²⁴ With Jesus' death and resurrection and the advent of the Holy Spirit this will change, but for now, this eschatological moment reminds me of the 6th Beatitude:

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*²²⁵

The pure in heart are those who have an active faith²²⁶ and they do what they do "*as for the Lord.*"²²⁷ These, indeed, "*shall see God.*" These are true believers and true followers of Christ. The rest of mankind will see Him for the last time when He pronounces sentence and adjourns court.

It bears repeating, finally, the Savior's encouraging words to His disciples on the eve of His departure. While we await His return, these words ring clear in our hearts and nothing more need be said. I need to know nothing else. This is *my* eschatology:

"You believe in God," our Lord looked into our souls, "*Trust me. I will return for you.*"²²⁸

*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*²²⁹

²²⁴ Romans 6:1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?

²²⁵ Matthew 5:8

²²⁶ James 2:18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

²²⁷ Colossians 3:23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord ...

²²⁸ John 14:1

²²⁹ Revelation 22:20

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