

Do we encourage sinners to continue in their evil ways by taking away the threat of eternal damnation? No! It remains 'a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb 10:31). It is infinitely better to walk this life in fellowship with Jesus Christ and union with God than to live our days here in darkness and sin. Paul was constrained to be an 'ambassador for Christ' not by the fear of hell, but by fear of the Lord and by the love of Christ (2 Cor 5:11,14,20). We no longer see the human race as hell-bound sinners most of whom will eventually be permanently written off. We see each one as a creation of God for whom He has a purpose that will be accomplished. Our love for man will increase.

How then do we see God in this new light? Firstly, we see his power enormously enhanced. We see him exalted far above all and in total dominion over his creation. Secondly we see his wisdom in fresh glory. His plan is far wiser and deeper than we had previously seen. Thirdly we have a new vision of his love. He really does love each one of the billions of members of this human race with a love that will eventually bring all to perfection. 'Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and unfathomable His ways! For from him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory for the ages. Amen' (Rom 11:33, 36).

Postscript

Jonah reluctantly went to Nineveh and told the people of that city that they had 40 days to repent before their city would be overthrown. Surprisingly - at least to us - the whole city believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth. What was Jonah's reaction to this? **Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.** God then said to Jonah: 'Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?' (Jonah 4:11).

If you have long believed in the eternal damnation of sinners and warned them of endless torment, and now begin to see that things are not as you had thought, will you react like Jonah with resentment at God's mercy and love, or will you rejoice that his grace and loving kindness go far beyond what you had previously imagined?

Universal Reconciliation

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Jesus), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

Colossians 1:19, 20

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verse 5 he says, 'Besides Me there is no God.' In verse 7 he adds, 'the one forming light and creating darkness, causing peace and creating evil; I am the Lord who does all these things.' Some English versions read *calamity* rather than *evil*. The Hebrew word can have either meaning. Good and evil are not two opposing forces, like white and black on the chessboard, striving for mastery of the universe. God created all things including evil to serve his own purposes, and he is in total control.

The prophet Habakkuk wrestled with this problem. Read chapter 1 verses 5 and 6: 'Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days - You would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people' ... God raised up an evil people to work out his purposes of judgement and correction for Israel. Habakkuk, like us, found it difficult to understand.

In Romans 9:17, Paul quotes Exodus 9:16 to state emphatically that God raised up Pharaoh. Pharaoh is like Satan, holding the people of God in cruel bondage and captivity until the deliverer comes to set them free. Paul goes on to state the absolute sovereignty of God.

When we start to see Satan and evil and wicked nations as tools in the hand of God for working out his purposes, everything begins to make sense. God plunged the whole creation down into sin that He might bring it up again having known evil and chosen good.

Job in his innocent integrity was certainly pleasing in the eyes of God. God's work however was not complete. How much greater was Job's appreciation, love and understanding of God after he had suffered. Like the whole creation, he had to go down before he could rise to a greater height.

In Jesus himself above all we see the same pattern. He came down by steps from the greatest height to the lowest depths, before God raised Him again to the highest glory at His right hand.

Conclusion

If these things are true, what effect will they have on our attitudes to God and to man?

The picture that now emerges from our study is not a hell of unmitigated, unending torment. Rather it is a place of judgement for correction. We begin to see a loving Creator who is not going to be content with his creatures until they are ultimately purged and cleansed of every sin. He is taking infinite pains over their perfection. His purposes may be long in their outworking, but in the end they will be perfectly accomplished.

God's Overall Plan

We must now stand back to see the wider implications of our argument. If the traditional view is correct, Adam and Eve of their free will were ensnared by Satan and sinned against God plunging their entire race into sin. Jesus suffered and gave his life for all mankind, but only won back a very small proportion of our race for God, leaving a large majority permanently in the hands of Satan to live and die and then suffer perpetual and indescribable torment. Many of us have reluctantly accepted this view because we could see no other in the Scriptures .

Such a view in its implications leaves Satan almost equal with God. It has probably borrowed much from heathenism where gods of good and evil fought among themselves on roughly equal terms. Heathenism always gives evil an exalted position, and frequently encourages its followers to worship it. I get the impression that science fiction follows the same lines, though confess I have not studied the subject in depth!

Can we discover a scriptural view of the place of evil? Let us turn first to Romans 8:20 and 21: **'For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.'** In this passage God clearly takes responsibility for the fall of creation. He subjected the creation to futility in hope of its future deliverance. It was all part of his full creative plan. He did not lose the first round in a conflict with Satan. He positively planned that events should go that way.

Ultimately we must see that God takes responsibility for evil and uses it to bring about his purposes. In Isaiah chapter 45 God states his sovereignty. He states that he has raised up Cyrus, a heathen king, for his purposes. In

Introduction

When we study the scriptures on the final destiny of unbelievers, we meet an apparent contradiction.

Some scriptures seem to say that all the human race will be saved. Consider the following:

- **'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive'** (1Cor 15:22-24).
- **'...God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of believers'** (1Tim 4:10).
- **'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Jesus), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'** (Col 1:19, 20).

Other scriptures appear to teach that unbelievers will suffer eternal torment.

- **'They will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever ...'** (Rev 14:10, 11).
- **'... for whom black darkness has been reserved for ever'** (Jude 13).
- **'Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life'** (Mat 25:46).

How can we reconcile this apparent contradiction in the scriptures? How can both teachings be correct?

Universal Salvation

First we will consider some scriptures that lead us to believe that all will eventually be saved. No single scripture is conclusive on this point, but the evidence of several put together is extremely strong.

Revelation 5:13 reads, **'And every created thing that is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and**

honour and glory and dominion and power for ever and ever.” Every created being is heard praising God. This could hardly happen while 90 per cent of the human race was permanently lost and suffering agonising torment in hell!

1 Corinthians 15:22-24 strongly states universal salvation: ‘For as in Adam **all** die, so also in Christ **all** shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming, then comes the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished **all** rule and **all** authority and power.’ Traditionalists tend to interpret this as ‘All who are in Christ will be made alive’; but that is not what the book says. Paul here simply states that in Adam **all** die, and in Christ **all** will be made alive, though not at the same time or all in this age. Salvation is not for all *in this life*, but happens in progressive ages and stages.

We find further evidence of this in 1 Peter 3:19-20. We read that ‘Christ in the spirit went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, ...’ These rather difficult verses are clarified a little further on in chapter 4 verse 6: ‘For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to God.’ Peter is not here referring to the righteous saints of old; he is speaking of those before the flood of whom God said that ‘every intent of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually’ (Gen 6:5). We see even these eventually becoming alive in the spirit.

Colossians chapter 1 verses 16, 19 and 20 carry a lot of weight. ‘For by him **all** things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; **all** things were created by him and for him. ... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself **all** things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.’ These verses clearly state that God created **all** things through Jesus, and reconciled **all** things to himself through Jesus. They even imply that spirits which are now evil will eventually be reconciled to God.

Fire is a cleansing agent. It accompanied the law-giving on Sinai. Throughout the scriptures it is symbolic of the presence of God. **Our God is a consuming fire** (Heb 12:29). (It specially signifies the sanctifying Holy Spirit. Brimstone or sulphur that accompanies fire was also regarded as a purifying agent in ancient times. In Greek it is θειον (*theion*), the neuter singular of the adjective θειος (*theios*) meaning divine. It is obviously related to God.

In Matt 25:46 Jesus speaks of *aionios* punishment. There are two words for punishment in Greek. Κολασις (*kolasis*), the word used here, carries a definite sense of correction and comes from a root originally meaning *to prune*. We prune trees in the hope of getting more fruit - not in retributive fury!

In 2 Thes 1:9, in most translations of the Bible, we read of *aionios* destruction from the presence of the Lord. However, I believe this should be translated *lostness* rather than *destruction*. Jesus came to seek and save that which was lost. For those who do not repent and believe, this lostness and absence from the Father will continue until, like the prodigal son, they finally return to him.

We must now revisit Revelation 14:10,11: ‘(they) will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever’... Can anyone imagine Jesus supervising the ceaseless and unending torture of vast numbers of the human race? The most hardened inquisition tormenter could hardly do such a thing. However, Jesus would happily supervise the purifying and purging of all who need it. This would be totally consistent with the character of the one who gave his own life in agony to save all.

Lastly we must review the phrase *aionios* judgement in Heb 6:2. It is called an elementary, foundational teaching. The root meaning of judgement is separation. Again the flesh must be separated from the spirit. It is a process that we should experience in this life. We should judge ourselves, if we do not want to be judged, and we must put to death the deeds of the flesh that we may walk in the spirit. If we are not willing for judgement now, it must come later.

who believed in universal salvation. Of these Origen is probably the best known.

In the last 400 years, Bible translations have nearly all followed the traditional view of eternal punishment. No doubt this has had a strong influence on popular belief. Even so there have been people who have disagreed.

Anyway, the church is not always right! The majority of people who call themselves Christians believe the Pope is head of the church, and everything that goes with that! At times in church history, almost the whole church hierarchy has been utterly corrupt both in doctrine and in life. It should never surprise us to find the majority in error. We must learn to seek God for ourselves, and, if necessary, follow him alone.

The mainstream church has had an interest in teaching eternal judgement. Unable to attract people by showing the love, joy, peace and forgiveness offered freely in Christ, the church has depended on threats of future torment to keep its grip on its members. Eternal judgement has been the party line. All verses that contradict it have been ignored or twisted to mean something different from their obvious meaning. We are so accustomed to the lie, that we find it difficult to accept the truth.

Future Punishment

The New Testament undoubtedly speaks of punishment for those who reject Jesus Christ. Jesus and the apostles taught this as a certainty. God cannot accept unrepentant sinners. He would not be just and holy if he could. We must now consider the nature of what awaits the unbeliever.

In Matthew 18:8-9 Jesus speaks of *aionios* fire and a Gehenna of fire. We find the same imagery in the lake of fire in the book of Revelation. Fire destroys, but it does not destroy everything. Paul told the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:12-15) that it was possible to build with gold, silver and precious stones, or with wood, hay and straw. The fire would test each man's work. Clearly wood, hay and straw will be destroyed; gold, silver and precious stones will not.

Another scripture helps establish the case for the salvation of all: 1 Tim 4:10 says, '...God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of believers'. This verse implies that God saves all, but saves believers in some special sense. For believers, as I see it, there is salvation from sin, sickness and many other evils in this life, and salvation from the coming judgement. For unbelievers, salvation is not till later.

One more scripture among many others is worth quoting: 'For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things' (Rom 11:36). Must we add to this "except 90 or maybe 99 per cent of the human race, the crown and glory of His creation, which He made in His own image to rule the universe, who are destined for perpetual torment in hell"?

Eternal Damnation

We will now consider the Bible's teaching on eternal damnation. The Bible speaks of "eternal fire", "eternal punishment", "eternal destruction (lostness)" and "eternal judgement". Everyone who believes in the inspiration of Scripture must take these statements seriously. Yet no one who believes in and experiences a God of love can feel comfortable with the idea of billions of their fellow members of the human race suffering perpetual torture with no hope of any end. Does the Bible really say that they will?

Aion and Aionios

The doctrine of eternal punishment rests on the meaning of two Greek words: the noun *αιων* (aion) (from which we get the word *eon*) normally meaning an *age* and its adjective *αιωνιος* (aionios) literally meaning *relating to an age* or *age-lasting*. The English phrase *for ever* is a translation of the Greek phrase *εις τον αιωνα* (eis ton aiona - literally *to the eon* or *to the age*); and the English adjectives *eternal* and *everlasting* are both translations of the adjective *αιωνιος* (aionios – *age-lasting*).

So the phrases *eternal punishment*, *eternal destruction* and *eternal judgement* translated literally are *age-lasting punishment*, *age-lasting destruction* and *age-lasting judgement*; and Bible statements that speak of *judgement lasting for ever* are literally *judgement lasting for the age*.

The Greek phrase *eis ton aiona* is itself a literal translation of the Hebrew phrase **עוֹלָם** (to “*olam*”), which does not imply time without limit, but rather implies time to the limit of our sight.

So in Scripture, rightly translated, the length of future punishment is indefinite, as is also the length of future rewards in heaven. Punishment, I believe, will be limited in duration; but heaven unlimited. Both, I believe, will be outside our earthly time frame.

(The full explanation of the Greek and Hebrew words *αιων* and **עוֹלָם** is complicated and I have written two separate articles on the subject: [The Aeonian Realm](#) and [Aion and Olam](#), which I hope will help people who want to make an in depth study of this subject.)

The Rich Man and Lazarus

What about the well-known story in Luke chapter 16 of the rich man and Lazarus and ‘*the great chasm fixed*’ between them after they died? Most people never look in any detail at this passage, and just assume that Jesus was talking about individual salvation, and destiny after death. Let’s take a closer look.

The context of this passage is set a few verses earlier: ‘**The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus**’. Jesus was speaking to the spiritually privileged people of his day. The rich man, who was dressed in purple and lived in luxury, was a picture of them. The poor beggar, Lazarus, at his gate clothed in rags with dogs licking his wounds pictures the spiritual outsider. Dogs are unclean animals.

Both of them die, and we find Lazarus not in heaven, but in Abraham’s bosom. How could an ignorant heathen like Lazarus end up in Abraham’s bosom, while a son of Abraham was in torment? The rich man continually addressed Abraham as *father*, but Abraham never called him *my son*. This story was shocking and offensive to its original Jewish hearers.

What about the chasm? The Greek of verse 26 reads ‘**And in all these things ... there is a great chasm fixed...**’ not ‘**besides all these things ...**’ (as in most translations), which is almost the opposite. The chasm lay in the

differences between the two men. There was a spiritual chasm between them. Sometimes you speak to people who are strongly grounded in scripture, and have had every spiritual opportunity, and yet cannot receive any real spiritual truth or understanding. Nothing can pass from you to them or them to you. There is a great chasm fixed between you.

There has been a chasm between Jew and Gentile for most of the last 2000 years. The church has bitterly persecuted the Jews, and the Jews have hated what they thought was the Christian faith. Almost nothing has passed across the chasm between them. Like the rich man, the Jews have spent much of that time in torment.

Whatever the nature of this chasm, the fact that it was fixed then, does not necessarily mean that it will always be fixed. If God can move mountains, he can also fill chasms.

Many Jews, both in the land of Israel and in the diaspora, are now returning to the true bosom of Abraham, and believing in their Messiah. Many members of the churches, in spite of thinking they are Abraham’s children, have a great chasm fixed between themselves and God.

Pre-Existence

The Bible contains strong evidence that we existed as spirits with God before we entered our human bodies. I have discussed this in a separate writing entitled *Pre-existence* The book of Ecclesiastes makes a clear pronouncement: ‘**the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it**’ (Ecc 12:7) The word *return* cannot mean anything other than to go back to where you have come from. If we existed as spirits with God before entering this world, then eternal torment and separation from God after leaving this world become an absurdity. How could a loving and wise God send spirits to this world with a high probability that they would never return to him, but instead spend eternity in indescribable pain and suffering?

Traditional Church Teaching

Hasn’t the church always taught eternal judgement? Don’t nearly all Christians agree on it? The answer is no. There were early church fathers