

Some members of our race repent and receive the gift of eternal life. Others continue in their sins.

To those who repent Jesus speaks the words, “**Today you will be with me in Paradise**” (Luke 23:43). He has borne their sins on Calvary.

Those who do not repent must bear their own sins. But when they have borne their sins, and received the appropriate corrective punishment, they too will be reconciled to God.

Conclusion

I started this writing by considering the apparent clash between the belief in Universal Reconciliation, which many people now hold, and the teaching of Jesus about the *unforgivable sin*. How can both be right?

We then faced some ambiguity in the words of Jesus. Was he speaking about the *age to come* or the *world to come*? In this writing, I have interpreted it both ways.

The people of Israel sinned against God in rejecting first their prophets and then Jesus himself. As a people they went into a long and bitter exile from their land till the debt was paid in full. Their past sins against God as a people have been forgotten. We have now moved into a new age and the time for their restoration has come.

The same is true, I believe, at the individual and personal level. “**Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered**” (Ps 32:1); but those who are not forgiven must pay the penalty of their sins. When the debt is paid, the sins will be forgotten, and they with the remainder of the human race will finally be reconciled to God.

Universal Reconciliation and the Unforgivable Sin

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substance. Fire and sulphur are both cleansing agents and clearly picture a purifying process that unrepentant sinners must undergo.

The intensity of the purging will not be the same for each person. God is a just judge. The punishment will always be proportional to the sins that have been committed and the condition of the sinner.

When the purging is complete the punishment will come to an end.

Duration of Punishment

What is the duration of this punishment? Traditional translations of the Bible say that it will be everlasting. But, as we have seen, the Greek word αἰών (aion) is ambiguous in its meaning and there is no way that eternal torment can be a proportional punishment for sin committed during a brief life on earth.

In addition to this, time, as Einstein told us, is part of the space time continuum and is relative rather than absolute. Space and time are not independent of each other, but linked together. God, as creator of the universe, is clearly outside the universe and not part of it. He is not part of the space he created. If space and time are linked together, then God must clearly also be outside time. So time in the spiritual world cannot have the same meaning as time on earth.

All just punishment is proportional to the offence that has been committed. If the offence is not forgiven the penalty must be paid. But when the penalty has been paid, the crime is then forgotten.

Summary

Let me summarise what I have said.

As Paul told us, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Every member of the human race, except one, has been a sinner. Furthermore, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23).

Nature of Punishment

What is the nature of this punishment? The Bible has few clear statements about the afterlife. It has hundreds of references to heaven, but these refer to the heavenly realm rather than the afterlife. Paul wrote about wrestling with spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places (Eph 6:12).

English, unlike many other languages, has two separate words for heaven and sky. Hebrew and Greek each have only one and both of these (שָׁמַיִם - shamayim and οὐρανός - ouranos) are nearly always used in the plural. Often they would be better translated sky. The phrase go to heaven does not occur once in the whole Bible. Jesus told Nicodemus that without the new birth he would neither see the kingdom of heaven nor enter into it (John 3:3-5); but he was speaking about a present experience which Nicodemus did not have and not what would happen after he died.

A few Bible passages do clearly speak about the afterlife. Almost all of these are either from the mouth of Jesus himself, or from the book of Revelation.

Jesus used two different words to speak of the afterlife. In Matt 18:9 he said, “**And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the Gehenna of fire**”. Gehenna or *gei hinnom* (valley of Hinnom) was the name of the rubbish dump outside Jerusalem, where “**the worm did not die and the fire was not quenched**”.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus ([Luke 16:19-24](#)), the rich man went to Hades, where he was tormented in the flames.

In the book of Revelation, we read several times about a lake burning with fire and sulphur. See [Rev 14:10](#) and [Rev 19:20](#).

In nearly all these references we read about fire and in Revelation also sulphur (brimstone). I must emphasise that this is picture language. A spirit cannot be tormented by a physical

Introduction

Many people these days believe in Universal Reconciliation - the belief that every member of the human race will eventually be reconciled to God. This teaching is based, among other scriptures, on Paul's words in [Col 1:19,20](#) which say that through Jesus God will reconcile all things to himself.

But how can this teaching be reconciled with the words of Jesus in [Matthew 12:32](#) and [Mark 3:29](#) where he spoke about the unforgivable sin?

According to some translations he said this sin would “**not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come**”.

According to other translations he said it would “**not be forgiven, either in this world, or in the world to come**”.

And there is a huge difference!

The age to come implies a future period on this earth; *the world to come* implies what happens after we die.

No forgiveness in *the world to come* appears to imply that unbelievers will either spend eternity in separation from God or perhaps be annihilated and cease to exist.

No forgiveness in *the age to come* leaves a possibility that, in some future age, here on earth, after *the age to come*, there might be reconciliation with God.

I will explore this translation problem later, but first we must consider the nature of God's justice and whether it is compatible with a sin that cannot be forgiven.

God's Justice

Most traditional teaching on the subject of God's justice is very simple. All members of the human race are sinners. Jesus has borne the penalty of the sins of the whole world. People who repent and put their trust in him will be forgiven and spend eternity in heaven with him. People who don't repent will not be forgiven and will spend

eternity in torment in hell. In other words, the same reward for all believers; the same punishment for all unbelievers.

Very simple, but not in line either with logic, or with justice or, of course, with the Scriptures.

Fundamentally, God is just. Isaiah said, “**there is no other god besides me, a just God and a Saviour**” (Isa 45:21). And David wrote, “**Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne**” (Psalm 89:14). The Hebrew word צַדִּיק (tsadiq) meaning *just* or *righteous* occurs 197 times in the Bible. This world is full of injustice, but God is just.

Abraham asked, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen 18:25).

We will look at three principles of God’s justice:

1. Sin against God is more serious than sin against man.
2. Sin committed in knowledge is more serious than sin committed in ignorance.
3. Punishment is always proportional to the offence.

Sin against God or Man

What is the greatest sin? Without doubt it is breaking the greatest commandment. Jesus made it very clear: “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.**” (Matt 22:37-39)

The greatest sin is sin against God. Sin against man comes second. Man, of course, reverses this order. For man, sin against man is the greatest sin. Sin against God does not matter so much. In man’s logic, the mass murderers of history were the greatest sinners and if there is any after-life they will receive the greatest punishment.

The ten commandments tell us the same story. The first four commandments deal with sin against God. The last six deal with sin

A similar length of time separated the beginning and end of their exile from their land. The punishment was closely proportional to their sin. That punishment is now ended and many Jewish people have returned to their land. God is just.

Blessing to the world

God said to Abraham, “**In your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed**” (Gen 26:4). And of course we have seen the fulfilment of those words. The primary fulfilment without doubt was in Jesus Christ, who came as Saviour of the World; but the secondary fulfilment was in our Scriptures. Every writer of the Bible (except Luke) was a descendent of Abraham. These scriptures have been translated into every major language of the world.

Is the blessing of the Jewish people to the world now complete? Not, according to the apostle Paul. He wrote, “**For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?**” (Rom 11:15).

What is the nature of this blessing?

Jewish scientists, especially in physics, medicine and computing, have brought incredible material blessings to the world. The websites [10 Jewish inventions that changed the world](#) and [List of Israeli inventions](#) give extraordinary lists of Jewish and Israeli inventions.

But is this what Paul was predicting?

No! I believe Paul was talking about spiritual blessing. As more and more Jewish people discover Jesus as their Messiah, I believe they will bring untold spiritual blessings to the rest of humanity.

Individual Punishment and Restoration

We have looked at the rejection and restoration of the Jewish people. We will now consider the subject of personal, individual punishment and restoration. We will consider the nature and duration of this punishment and the subsequent restoration to union with God.

- Jews have returned to Israel from all over the world and Israel became an independent state in 1948.
- An unprecedented number of Jews have accepted Jesus as their Messiah, probably more in the last 50 years than in the previous 20 centuries.

All these things illustrate the fact that, in the sight of God, we have now moved into a new age.

Rejection and Restoration

What is the situation of the Jewish people now?

Paul prophesied about their future in his letter to the Romans.

He had travelled all over the Roman empire preaching the gospel message everywhere he went, first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Most of the Jews rejected his message, but many Gentiles believed.

When Paul finally reached Rome, he summoned the Jewish leaders and tried to convince them from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah ([Acts 28:17-28](#)). Most of them rejected his message. His final words to them were, “**Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.**”

Paul saw that God had temporarily rejected the Jewish people; but he also foresaw their restoration.

He wrote, “**a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved**” (Rom 11:25,26).

Was the punishment of the Jewish people proportional to their sin? [Bible Chronology](#) supplies an interesting answer. 2000 lunar years separated the birth of Abraham from the death and resurrection of Jesus. During that time, they consistently rejected their own prophets and finally rejected Jesus and his first followers.

against man. “**Thou shalt not kill**” is the sixth commandment, not the first.

Let’s look again then at the words of Jesus: “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age (or world) or in the age (or world) to come” (Matt 12:31-32).

And let’s compare them with Heb 6:4-6: “**For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.**”

Both these passages speak of sin against God.

The words of Jesus draw a contrast between sin against man and sin against God. Jesus used the phrase *ben adam*, literally *son of man* but a Hebrew idiom for a *human being*. He often used this phrase to refer to himself. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of God. Hence the clear contrast between sin against man and sin against God. Sin against man can be forgiven in this age or world; but not sin against God.

Sin against Knowledge

Jesus made it very clear that sin committed in ignorance is much less blameworthy than sin committed in knowledge. He spoke these words, “**And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating.**” (Luke 12:47-48).

In his dying moments he prayed, “**Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing**” (Luke 23:34).

Millions in so-called heathen countries have died without ever hearing the name of Jesus or reading a word of our Scriptures. Their punishment (if they are punished) will be far lighter than those of us who have heard and read, but not obeyed.

A passage from Hebrews powerfully illustrates both sin against God and sin against knowledge: “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?” (Heb 10:26-29).

Proportional to the Offence

In all civilised countries punishment is proportional to the offence. Breaking the speed limit by a few miles per hour is not a serious crime. Maybe a fine of £50. Petty theft or shoplifting is a bit worse and would have higher penalties. Armed robbery is much more serious and probably gets a prison sentence. Rape and murder can lead to long sentences in prison. Some countries still have the death penalty for murder. The punishment is always proportional to the offence. Can it be otherwise with God?

Some Muslim countries have the death penalty for blasphemy against the prophet or the Quran or leaving the Muslim religion; but few people outside those countries would see that as justice.

Throughout the Bible, punishment is proportional to the offence.

[Exodus chapter 21](#) gives a list of different penalties for different offences. Many different offences are described in this chapter, relating to animals, slaves and other humans and in every case the penalty is proportional to the offence. Its best known words are “eye for eye, tooth for tooth”. The purpose of these words is not to encourage revenge, but to limit revenge to being the same as the

fishermen of Galilee. And what was their response? The majority refused to believe and rejected this move of the Holy Spirit. This was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This was the sin that could not be forgiven.

The judgment of God fell and the Jewish people were driven from their land and scattered to the four corners of the earth. There they remained in unbelief till the end of the age should come.

A New Age

Have we now reached the end of that “age to come”? Are we now living in a new age? I believe there is strong evidence that we are.

In the last 100 years, the world has changed in unimaginable ways. My grandparents grew up in a world with no aeroplanes, no cars, no television, no radio, no telephones, no smart phones and no internet! No one who died before the beginning of the 20th century could possibly imagine the world in which we now live. If they could see it, they would declare with one voice that it was a new age.

[Bible Chronology](#) tells us the same story. The subject is complicated and different researchers have disagreed over many details. One thing however is clear: if we add up the years recorded in the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament), we find that there are 4000 years from Adam to Jesus and about 2000 from then till the present day. In other words, 6000 years from Adam till now. (I have covered these facts in more detail in the writings [Bible Chronology](#) and [The Year of Jubilee](#).) “One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2Pet 3:8). Six days have now passed and we are now entering the seventh day, which is the day of the Lord.

When we turn to the Jewish world we find that three extraordinary things have happened in the past century:

- Six million Jews perished in the holocaust.

Rejection and Restoration of Israel

If we take the words of Jesus to mean **this age** and **the age to come**, we must ask what and when were these ages? When did they begin and when did they end? At what points in history have old ages ended and new ages begun? What have been the most significant transitional moments in history?

Without doubt the greatest event in all history was the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The immediate consequence of his death and resurrection was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We can say then with certainty that with the death of Jesus an old age ended and at Pentecost a new age began.

So when Jesus spoke of *this age* he was referring to the age which was soon to end with his death; and when he spoke of the *age to come* he was speaking of the new age which was soon to begin at Pentecost.

This interpretation fits closely with the words that Jesus spoke. Jesus said, **“every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people”** and **“whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven”**. Shortly after this the Jews and Romans together committed a terrible sin. They put the Son of God to death. Was this sin forgivable? Yes, according to the words of Jesus, it was. Jesus even said, **“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”**

What then happened in the “age to come” - the age that began at Pentecost?

Jesus, the son of man, had departed from the earth and in his place the Holy Spirit had come. With his coming came opportunities of immense blessing, but also dangers of fulfilling the words of Jesus, blaspheming against the Holy Spirit and committing the unforgivable sin.

What did my ancestors, the Jewish people do? They saw with their own eyes the amazing works of God. They saw the sick healed, the dead raised, and the lame walking. They heard the miraculous gift of tongues. They saw the transformed lives of the simple

damage done. Accidental damage is always treated more leniently than deliberate actions.

In [Matt 11:20-24](#) Jesus spoke about the cities that had witnessed his mighty works, and not repented. He told them, **“it would be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for them”**. Again this speaks of degrees of punishment.

The Unforgivable Sin

So what is the unforgivable sin? Jesus described it as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The context in [Matthew 12:22-32](#) was the Pharisees saying that Jesus cast out spirits by Beelzebub, the prince of the demons. The Pharisees saw with their own eyes the power of the Holy Spirit acting through Jesus to cast out demons and were attributing this to the devil. They were clearly sinning both against God and against knowledge. They had no excuse for their words against God. This was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This was the unforgivable sin.

Forgiveness

The English word *forgive* in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek verb [ἀφίημι](#) (aphiemi) of which the primary meaning is to *send away*. Forgiveness is the sending away of sins.

Every year on the day of atonement in ancient Israel, the high priest laid his hands on a goat (a scapegoat) and confessed the sins of the people. The goat was then sent away into the wilderness, bearing the sins of the people ([Lev 16:21](#)). Both the high priest and the goat were pictures of Jesus who offered up himself for the sins of the people. This ceremony took place year after year for the fresh sins that the Israelite people had committed; but Jesus, when he died on Calvary, made one full and final offering for the sins of the whole world.

We must look in more detail at the meaning of *forgiveness*. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, **“forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”** (Matt 6:12). (Debts is the normal meaning of

the Greek word ὀφειλήματα.) If a debt is forgiven the debtor has nothing to pay. If not forgiven, he must pay it in full. But when he has paid it, whether it was small or large, the matter is closed. The debt has not been forgiven. It is simply forgotten.

Jesus expanded this simple prayer in a story he told in [Matthew 18:23-34](#). A servant owed a large debt to his master. When the servant begged for mercy, the master freely forgave him. Wonderful! He did not need to pay the debt. The servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a small sum. When the fellow servant could not pay, he had him thrown into prison till he paid. When the master heard about this he was furious and threw the servant into prison till he had paid all his debt. The punishment was severe, but when it was finished he became a free man again.

People who are forgiven are free. They have no debts to pay. People who are not forgiven must pay their debts in full. But when they have paid their debts, they also are free.

Debt to God is a picture of sin. Clearly, we do not owe God money. Debts may be large or small, but in every case, if the debt is not forgiven, the exact amount owed must be paid; neither more nor less. The concept of unlimited punishment - eternal torment - is therefore untenable.

What is the nature of God-given punishment and when does it take place? Is it in this life or in the life to come? Or in this world or in the world to come?

This brings us back to the question of the right translation of the words of Jesus. We will return now to that problem.

Which Translation is Right?

Which translation of the words of Jesus is right? Did he mean *this world or the world to come* or did he mean *this age or the age to come*?

This link [Matt 12:32](#) gives about 60 different English translations of his words. About half of these translations put *age to*

come and most of the rest put *world to come* or *life to come* which effectively mean the same thing. All older translations put *world to come* and most newer translations put *age to come*.

The problem is the Greek word αἰών (aion), from which we get our English word *eon*. I have written a separate article, [Αἰών and ἔρχομαι \(olam\)](#), on the different meanings and uses of the Greek work αἰών. Clearly *age* and *world* are both legitimate translations of it.

The actual words of Jesus as recorded in Matt 12:22 are “οὐτε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι (this aion) οὐτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι (the coming)”. But that, of course, is not what Jesus said, because he spoke in Hebrew, not in Greek. The equivalent phrases, both in ancient and in modern Hebrew, are “ha-olam ha-ze” (העולם הזה) and “ha-olam ha-ba” (העולם הבא) - “*this olam*” and “*the olam to come*”.

(I once heard of some much needed advice to Israeli drivers, “It is better arrive late in *ha-olam ha-ze* (this olam) than early in *ha-olam ha-ba* (the olam to come)”! That clearly refers to *this world* and *the world to come*!)

So how did ancient commentators interpret these Hebrew words? “The world to come” or “the age to come”? The surprising answer is both ways!

Why has God allowed such confusion and lack of clarity in the Scriptures? And I believe this is far from being the only place where the Scriptures are not clear. I believe God has good reasons. Many truths in the Scriptures are hidden until he chooses to reveal them. And even then they will remain “**hidden from the wise and prudent**” and revealed only to those to whom God chooses to reveal them.

I believe that both interpretations - *the world to come* and *the age to come* - may be valid in different contexts. *The age to come* may apply to the people of Israel at the national level. *The world to come* may apply to people at the individual level. We will now explore these two different interpretations.