

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?'

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

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?

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**

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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 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.

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' (1 Cor 15:22-24).
- '...God, who is the Saviour of **all** men, especially of believers' (1 Tim 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

We will begin by considering the scriptures that lead us to believe that all will eventually be saved. No scripture standing alone is conclusive on this point, but the evidence of several when 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!

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 **all** die in Adam, 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 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

Hell will ultimately be brought to Christ’s feet. It will perhaps take millions of ages, but when it is attained they will be full of joy and thankfulness towards God: though they will still be less happy than those who have accepted Christ on earth. Thus Hell also is a training school, a place of preparation for Home. Those in Hell know that it is not their home because they suffer there. Men were not created for Hell and therefore do not enjoy it and, when there, desire to escape to Heaven. They do so, but they find Heaven even more uncongenial than Hell, so they return. But this convinces them that there is something wrong in their lives, and thus they are gradually led to repentance. At least, that is the case with the majority, but there are some few personalities, Satan for instance, in regard to whom I was told, ‘Don’t ask about them. And so I didn’t like to ask, but I hoped that for them also there was some hope.’

‘They also told me that the saints help in the work of saving souls in Hell, because there can be no idleness in Heaven. Those in Hell will ultimately be brought to Heaven, like the prodigal son, but with regard to the ultimate fate of a certain number you must not ask.’ The Sadhu is inclined to think that perhaps these few will be annihilated.

Once I said ‘So many people will be lost because they have not heard of Christ.’ They said, ‘The contrary will be the case; very few will be lost.’ There is a kind of heavenly joke – no joke is not a good word for it. Very few will be lost but many will be saved. It is so but don’t tell,’ they said, as it were in jest, ‘because it will make men careless, and we want them to enjoy the First Heaven – that is, the Heaven on earth – as well.’

‘If there were no hope for all the non-Christians in the world and all the Christians who die in sin, God would stop creating men. We must do our part here on earth to save sinners, but if they refuse we need not be without hope for them.’

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

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.

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.

The Testimony of Sundar Singh

Here I believe it will be helpful to append the testimony of the Indian Sadhu Sundar Singh. In December 1904, Jesus appeared to Sundar when he was about to commit suicide, and he was dramatically converted. Subsequently he had many ecstatic experiences in which he conversed with angels and spirits. He gives the following account of what they told him about hell.

‘I was also told that the love of God operates even in Hell. God does not shine in His full light, because those there could not bear it, but He gradually shows them more and more light and by and by brings them on and moves their conscience towards something better, although they think that the desire is entirely their own. Thus God works on their minds from within, something in the same way, though in the opposite direction, as that in which Satan suggests temptation to us here. Thus, what with God's work within and the Light without, almost all those in

through Jesus. They even imply that spirits which are now evil will eventually be reconciled to God.

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 creatures of the human race suffering perpetual torture with no hope of any end. Does the Bible really state without doubt that they will?

Aion and Aionios

The doctrine of eternal punishment rests on the meaning of two Greek words: the noun *aion* (αἰών) and its adjective *aionios* (αἰώνιος).

The noun *aion* is used in several different ways in the New Testament. The way that concerns us here is its use in the phrases εἰς αἰῶνα (eis aiona) literally *to the eon* and εἰς αἰῶνας αἰῶνων (eis aionas aionon) literally *to eons of eons*. In traditional translations these phrases are translated *for ever* and *for ever and ever*. For example, ‘The smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever’ (Rev 14:10, 11). The adjective *aionios* has traditionally been translated *eternal* or *everlasting*. We find

both the positive phrases *eternal life*, *eternal inheritance* etc and the negative phrases *eternal fire*, *eternal judgment*, *eternal destruction* (*lostness*) and *eternal punishment*.

Have these words and phrases been translated correctly into English? Or could the translators have got it wrong?

How can anyone know for certain what any ancient Greek or Hebrew word means, now that all the people who spoke those languages have long since departed this life? The answer is that we must look in all the places in the Bible, or other available literature of the time, where the words are used. We then have to find a meaning that fits all the different contexts. In the case of Greek, we can search through both the New Testament and the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament).

Several phrases in both the Septuagint and the New Testament show that often *eis aionas* cannot be translated *for ever*.

‘He shall be your servant **for ever**’ (Deut 15:17).

‘Will you take him as a slave **for ever**?’ (Job 41:4).

‘That he may appear before the Lord and stay there **for ever**’ (1 Sam 1:22).

‘Its smoke shall go up **for ever**’ (Is 34:10).

‘The earth with her bars was about me **for ever**’ (Jonah 2:6).

‘**No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you**’ (Mat 21:19).

‘You will **never** wash my feet’ (John 13:8).

‘I will **never** eat meat again’ (1 Cor 8:13).

All these phrases are clearly limited in time. Many of them imply *for life*.

The following phrases in the New Testament show that *aionios* cannot always be translated *eternal*:

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. The great contrast is between the flesh and the spirit. 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 *theion*, the neuter singular of the adjective *theios* meaning divine. It is obviously related to God.

In Mat 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

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 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.

Any way 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 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.

'The mystery hidden for long ages past' literally 'hidden to *aionios times*' (Rom 16:25).

'Before the beginning of time' literally 'before *aionios times*' (2 Tim 1:9 and Titus 1:2).

Many writers, myself included, have taught that since *aion* literally means *an age* these phrases are correctly translated *for the age* and *for ages of ages*. Further they say that, since *aion* means *age*, the adjective *aionios* must mean *age-lasting* rather than *eternal* or *everlasting*. Punishment and judgement are therefore *age-lasting* rather than *everlasting*. They do not continue endlessly throughout eternity, but finish when their purpose is accomplished. (The excellent writer and man of God, Andrew Jukes is probably the original source of this teaching.)

While I totally agree with that conclusion, I believe that this means of reaching it is not correct. I believe the error stems from a failure to study the Hebrew that underlies the Greek. It is certainly true that in some contexts in the New Testament *aion* means *age*. However, when in English we have the phrases *for ever* and *for ever and ever*, the literal Greek is *to the aions* and *to the aions of the aions*. *To the age* and *to the ages of the ages* make no sense. However, both these phrases occur commonly in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew phrase *to olam* (לְעֹלָם). The Greek word *aionios* is also used to translate this Hebrew word *olam* (עֹלָם).

This Hebrew noun *olam* does not mean *an age*. Rather it comes from a verb root *alam* meaning to hide. The word *olam* implies *hidden time*. The phrase *to olam* (לְעֹלָם) looks forward as far as we can see to the future time horizon, beyond which everything is hidden. The phrase *from olam* (מֵעֹלָם) looks backward as far as we can see to the past time horizon, beyond which also everything is hidden.

When we turn to the New Testament we find that the noun *aion* and the adjective *aionios* are used in exactly the same way. They look backwards or forwards to the time horizon, beyond which we cannot

see. These words refer to the hidden spiritual realm, which is before, throughout and after time.

The things of God belong to a realm that is beyond time. *Eternal life*, or as I would prefer to say, *aeonian life* does not simply mean life that goes on for ever and ever. Rather it means spiritual life that we can experience here and now, and which belongs to a realm that is above and outside time. Jesus said: ‘**This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent**’ (John 17:3) Similarly *aeonian* judgment is not judgment that goes on for ever and ever. Rather it is a judgment that takes place in the hidden realm of the spirit.

Science also has a contribution to make on this subject. Both time and space had a beginning, maybe at the big bang. They will also have an end, maybe when the universe collapses in on itself. God himself is outside space and outside time. He made them both. If time ceases to be, will eternity have any meaning?

I have studied the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words in much greater detail, as well as scientific aspects of the subject, in an article entitled *The Aeonian Realm*.

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 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 the Jew and the 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**