

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT HELL?

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Why did someone as good and loving as Christ spend so much time warning us about “the fire that shall never be quenched”— a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth”? Why did He talk more about the fires of hell than about the joys of heaven?

The subject of hell is so sobering that many are more comfortable ignoring it. But there is no subject more deserving of our honest concern. In the following pages, RBC senior research editor Herb Vander Lugt leads us in a discussion that we hope will reawaken those of us who are living as if there is no tomorrow for the lost.

Martin R. De Haan II

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SUBJECT OF HELL?

Countless people among us seem obsessed with the subject of hell. Even irreligious individuals talk of “going to hell and back” for something they love. They speak of certainties as being “sure as hell,” or impossibilities as occurring “when hell freezes over.” And bad experiences are said to “hurt like hell.” Many otherwise polite people regularly inject color, emotion, and profanity into their conversation by adding a casual or angry reference to hell to almost any combination of words.

Yet ironically, the more *hell* shows up in casual conversation, the less it is actually thought about—even in religious circles. The more such a word is

used in an aggressive, profane way, the less threatening it seems to the user. Accordingly, the subject of hell has become as prevalent in street talk as it is absent in Sunday sermons.

The more hell shows up in casual conversation, the less it is actually thought about.

It wasn't always that way. Historically, most religions have held openly to the idea of an after-death judgment followed by punishment for evildoers. In the *New Encyclopedia Britannica*, we read:

The view that hell is the final dwellingplace of the damned after a last judgment is held by the western prophetic

religions: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. . . . Some modern theologians have again questioned the literalistic view but still hold that hell is, at least, a state of separation of the wicked from the good (Vol.5, p.814).

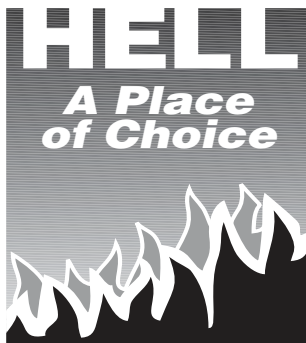
Our present reluctance to think seriously about the reality of future punishment may stem in part from an inadequate concept of God. We have forgotten that He is a God to be feared. The Russian theologian Berdyaev said, "It is remarkable how little people think about hell or trouble about it. This is the most striking evidence of human frivolity" (*The Destiny Of Man*, Scribner, 1937, p.33). What he wrote more than 50 years ago is even more true today than when he penned it.

We do not do people a favor when we remain silent

about the subject of hell. Jesus, the prime example of God's love, spoke of hell repeatedly. He said that some would rise from death to "the resurrection of condemnation" (Jn. 5:29). He declared that those who go to hell enter the horrible place where "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mk. 9:44,46,48). He also depicted it as a place of "outer darkness," where there "will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

Bertrand Russell said he decided to become an atheist when he read the words of Jesus about hell. But did he act wisely? At least he was consistent. He realized that hell deserves to be taken seriously. He knew that it doesn't make sense to say you believe in Christ while rejecting what He and His book say about an eternal "lake of fire."

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT HELL?



HELL IS A PLACE OF CHOICE

People don't choose hell with a full understanding of what they are doing. They don't have a clear picture of the eternal happiness they will miss or the everlasting separation and darkness they will endure. But according to the Bible, hell is a place of choice. As a result, the Bible repeatedly appeals to its readers to choose the way

of life rather than the path of death and judgment. Over and over, Jesus Himself urged His listeners to make wise choices with questions like:

What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? (Mk. 8:36-37).

Yet the same Bible also reminds us that most people will risk their eternal souls rather than feel obligated or indebted to the love and mercy of God. In some cases, this stubborn independence is easy to see. Some will even tell you that if there really is a heaven and a hell they would rather go to the place below because that's where their friends will be. Others say that heaven and God and eternal goodness sound boring. Still others are so angry at God for the pain and rejection that He has

allowed them to experience that they have literally challenged Him to send them to the devil and his place.

***The choices may
be underrated,
but the choices
are still there.***

Most people, however, are merely ignoring the long-term possibilities of their own choices. They are either counting on the hope that God is too loving to send them to hell, or they are assuming that they aren't bad enough to be sent there. Many are so preoccupied with trying to survive day-to-day struggles that they have chosen not to worry about the future.

In the process, such people make personal

choices for which they will be held accountable. Certainly they fail to understand the full weight of their choices. They fail to realize that just as the first man and woman made choices that resulted in enormous loss, so also we who are made in the image of God continue to be held accountable for the choices we make. With such choices and consequences in mind, the apostle Paul wrote:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them (Rom. 1:18-19).

As God's creatures, we owe Him glory and thanksgiving. God has a right to expect that we as a

race and as individuals recognize His lordship, give Him thanks, and live in grateful obedience to Him. But in our pride, we have refused to glorify God as God. Instead, we have become preoccupied with ourselves and our own happiness. We have chosen to love ourselves rather than God—to glorify ourselves rather than the Lord. This is why “the wrath of God” (Rom. 1:18) rests upon the human race. This divine wrath is a terrible reality. It is God’s revulsion against the things that contradict His holy being. It is God’s reaction to those who choose evil while rejecting His love.

Some accuse God of vindictiveness. But we would be wise to withhold our criticism and respond as quickly as we can to God’s invitation to escape the eternal fires. It was Christ Himself who urged us:

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it (Mt. 7:13-14).

Proportionately, this is still true. While religion is common all over the world, how many people do you know who actually and consistently love God and express their gratitude to Him? If you think carefully and honestly, you will have to admit that no one does. But Christians freely admit this and have placed their trust for salvation in Jesus Christ, believing that He paid for their sins when He died on the cross. When people refuse to believe on Him, they are choosing to stand on their own merits. To be placed on the road to heaven, we must

acknowledge our sin, admit that we can't save ourselves, and place our trust in Jesus Christ. John 3:16 states:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

If you haven't chosen to believe on Jesus Christ, you are choosing the path to hell. Don't listen to the behaviorists who suggest that you have no real choices of your own. Reject the New Age thinking that says you are governed by a non-moral Force. Accept the teaching of the Bible. If you reject Christ, you will have no right to blame anyone but yourself when you someday find yourself in hell. You will have to admit that you made the wrong choice. You won't be able to blame God.



HELL IS A PLACE OF TRUTH

The second point we need to see is that hell is a place of truth. Even though it is sometimes described as a place of outer darkness, it is a place of the light of truth. Hell will finally expose the true nature of all who have consistently rejected the love and grace and mercy of God. In the meantime, the true nature of human hearts is often buried under deceptive appearances.

Now, most people don't think of themselves as deserving of everlasting

punishment. Many who have chosen to live their lives apart from God don't look any different than others who openly admit their need of the forgiveness and mercy of Christ.

But present appearances are deceiving. While the Bible says that most people are headed for the lake of fire, many of them don't look as though they deserve a fire reserved for the devil and his angels. Evil men like Stalin or Hitler or serial killers might seem to qualify, but not the rank-and-file of people who seem to live basically decent lives.

Yet from the Bible's point of view, such evaluations are extremely misleading and even deceptive. The Bible shows us that the fires and blackness of hell will make eternal statements about (1) the true wickedness of public enemies and (2) the true wickedness of good people.

The Wickedness Of Public Enemies.

In some respects, human wickedness is terrible to contemplate. Think of what God sees as He looks down on the world of mankind. He watches the murders, adulteries, thefts, fights, and physical and emotional

*Think of the pain,
the anxiety, the
tears, and the
countless victims
that God sees.*

torment that occur day and night in every part of the world. He sees the child abusers—their lust, cruelty, and heartlessness. He sees wives crying, children abandoned, friends and partners betrayed, governments oppressing, and religious leaders fleeing their trusting flocks.

It is the moral and spiritual condition that God has been patiently tolerating ever since man's fall into sin. Read the apostle Paul's timeless and universal description of the human condition:

They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes (Rom. 3:12-18).

This is a striking picture of the dishonesty, the greed, the profanity, the deceitfulness, and the

cruelty that continues to produce rapists, child molesters, embezzlers, and pornographers. When the judgment of God falls, and when such persons are sentenced to the lake of fire described in Revelation 20:11-15, the fire will make an eternal statement of truth about those who have lived their lives at the expense of others.

What we need to realize, however, is that Romans 3 was not written merely to tell the truth about those public enemies who will one day find their rightful place in hell. It also describes:

The Wickedness Of Good People. A closer look shows that Romans 3:10-18 doesn't just describe the judgment-deserving character of those we call public enemies. Verse 10 expresses the inclusive argument of the first three chapters of Romans, when it says of

mankind, religious and non-religious alike:

There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one (3:10-12).

We don't like to think that good people deserve to go to hell. But our good impression of decent law-abiding neighbors is not a real reflection of the truth. We think naturally in very man-centered ways rather than in the God-centered measurement described in Romans 3. Man wasn't made to be a decent public servant. He was made to glorify his Maker and to enjoy Him forever. We weren't made to live decent, self-serving lives. We were made to depend gratefully on the love and goodness of God. We weren't

made just to abide by the external requirements of civil and religious law. We were made to worship God from our hearts and to love one another as He has loved us.

When we measure ourselves by that evaluation, the threat of hell becomes more of an issue. The irresistible fire of judgment will expose the enormous deception that now hides behind social and religious courtesies and proprieties.

We have good reason to shudder at the thought of standing in God's presence on our own merits. If we're honest, we must admit that apart from Christ we deserve to hear Him sentence us to hell. In God's sight, no one is really a good person.

As many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just

in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel (Rom. 2:12-16).

All people, at one time or another, sense that there is a God to whom they are morally accountable, that they have sinned, and that they need divine forgiveness. But most men and women stifle these disquieting thoughts. Some do so by denying the existence of a personal God. Some do so

by saying that what we call sins are merely weaknesses. Others affirm that God is so loving that He will never

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punish anyone on the other side of death. They don't want to acknowledge their sin and believe on Jesus Christ. But the day is coming when they will stand before God for final judgment. There they will see themselves as they really are. Stripped of all their self-righteousness, they will recognize their guilt before God. And nothing less than the lake of fire will ultimately tell the truth.



HELL IS A PLACE OF FAIR TREATMENT

We have seen that hell is the place people choose, even if unknowingly, when they go their own way instead of listening to God. We have also noted that hell is a place that will forever tell the truth about the real character of those who have rejected and resisted God's provision for their salvation. We are now ready to consider a third fact—that hell will be a place of fair treatment. Before anyone goes there, he will stand at a final judgment to determine

the exact degree of punishment he will receive. God will be perfectly fair.

The final judgment is depicted graphically in Revelation 20:11-15. This is the great white throne judgment. The Judge is none other than Jesus Christ (Jn. 5:24-30). All the unsaved will receive new bodies and will stand to be judged. Then the books containing the life record of every person and the one special book of life will be opened. The opening of these books shows that those who rejected God's gift of salvation will receive perfect justice.

In Romans 2:1-16, Paul pointed out that God will look at what people have done with their privileges and opportunities, and that He will be completely impartial and fair (vv.5-11). Those who possessed His Word, the law of verses 12-14, will be held accountable for their response to it.

Those who never received special revelation will be held accountable only for what they knew (vv.14-16).

Jesus taught this same principle when He said that the servant who knew his master's will and disobeyed would be beaten with "many stripes," but that

***God's love will
be just, and
His justice will
be loving.***

the servant who had less knowledge would be beaten with "few" (Lk. 12:47-48).

No judge or jury fully understands the person on trial. No human being can evaluate the exact degree of accountability in himself or anyone else. We are all profoundly influenced by hereditary and environmental factors

beyond our control. Yet we make choices after weighing options. Therefore, we are all accountable—at least to some degree. And God understands to what extent. He also knows how much we need His mercy.

When the young man who died in a gang war stands before Jesus Christ, he will find that the Lord understands all the circumstances of his short, violent, and troubled life—his absent father, his immoral mother, his disadvantaged peers, his complete ignorance of the gospel message, and his despair. The Lord Jesus will take all these factors into consideration. He knows exactly the degree of responsibility of this young man and will give him a sentence that perfectly suits his offense.

The rich, respectable landlord who died without Christ may receive a far

more severe sentence than most of his tenants, even those who had many brushes with the law. The Lord Jesus will take into account their respective privileges. He will see perfectly the underlying greed, selfishness, and pride of this man. He will understand the sense of despair that was a factor in some of the wrongs done by the tenants. All will receive fair treatment. God, the holy moral Governor of the universe, will dispense perfect justice to all wrongdoers.

The awesome picture of final judgment in Revelation 20:11-15 led Thomas Carlyle to exclaim: "What a magnificent conception is that of a final judgment! A righting of all the wrongs of the ages." The Lord Jesus Christ will take into account every circumstance, overlooking nothing. He will be the Supreme Court of the

universe. No one will be able to appeal His decisions. In fact, no one will feel the need to do so. Every person will acknowledge Him as Lord and admit that His verdict has been absolutely

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fair and right. It is at this time that everyone will recognize Him to be all He claimed to be, fulfilling the words of Philippians 2:9-11.

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth,

and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.



HELL IS A PLACE OF LOST HOPE

We have seen that people choose hell by rejecting the light they have received from God. We have seen that everyone is a sinner whose selfishness and pride call for divine punishment—even the nice non-Christian who has so many fine qualities. We have seen that Jesus Christ is going to judge every person individually

and will sentence him/her to receive exactly what he/she deserves. Now we are ready to develop the solemn fact that hell is a place of lost hope. We must take the love-filled, tear-marked Jesus seriously when He warned:

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt. 10:28).

We will consider the final and irreversible nature of this loss in three steps: First, we will examine the so-called “universalist” or “second chance” passages in the Bible. Second, we will consider the passages that speak of hell as a place of “destruction.” Third, we will study the implications of the fact that the terms *everlasting* or *eternal* often appear in reference to hell.

The “Second Chance” Passages. We who believe on Jesus Christ

and therefore are confident that we will go to heaven would like to see everyone get there eventually. We would very much like to find evidence in the Bible that the lost will get another chance to be saved after death. And there always have been teachers who

It is extremely dangerous to use a few difficult passages to try to override many clear ones.

have held the viewpoint of another opportunity after death. Some Bible students refer to themselves as universalists because they believe that eventually everyone or almost everyone will end up in heaven. They believe that 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6, and 1 Timothy

2:5-6 imply the hope of another chance after death. They view Acts 3:21, 1 Corinthians 15:22, Philippians 2:9-11, and Colossians 1:20 as verses which imply that almost all will eventually be among the redeemed. Let's take a look at these passages.

First Peter 3:18-20.

These verses declare that "Jesus preached to the spirits in prison," specifically to contemporaries of Noah. Some Bible interpreters believe that Peter was referring to the preaching done by Noah while he was building the ark. Others teach that between His death and resurrection Jesus went to the realm of the unsaved dead and announced what He had done. Still others believe He went to the prison house for fallen angels and announced His redeeming work to them. We may choose any of these interpretations. It is a

difficult passage, to be sure. Just as certain, however, is that we should not take a difficult passage like this and use it to overrule other passages like Hebrews 9:27, which states, “. . . it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.”

First Peter 4:6. This is another verse often used to prove that people will receive another chance. Peter wrote:

For this reason the gospel was preached to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

This verse refers to the proclamation of the gospel to living people who later died. The preaching was done while these individuals were alive. They were judged harshly by the world, but they now enjoy the bliss of heaven. They are far better

off than those who gained the praise of the world but must face God's judgment after death.

First Timothy 2:5-6.

This passage is also quoted as a proof of a second chance after death. It tells us:

There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

Those who view this passage as offering another chance for salvation after death point out that the ransom price was paid for all, and that it will be “testified” to all “in due time.” Some people in this world never receive an opportunity to hear the gospel, and many who do, hear it under very unfavorable circumstances. Therefore, “in due time,” under conditions more favorable after death, the gospel of salvation will be

offered to all. The context, however, eliminates such an interpretation. Paul made this statement in connection with his injunction that God's people pray for all men (not just for a small select company), and with his declaration that God desires all people to be saved (not just Israelites). He asserted that Christ's ransom was universal in availability and that the gospel testimony is to go out everywhere. There is no indication here of another gospel offer after death.

Acts 3:21. Peter spoke of "the times of restoration of all things," and this to some Bible scholars implies the idea that in the end all will be saved. But a careful study of this verse makes it clear that Peter was speaking about the restoration of Israel as predicted by the Old Testament prophets. They spoke of Israel's return to the land and the

restoration of the theocracy under David's Son, but they never predicted a day when the unsaved dead would be converted and translated to heaven.

First Corinthians 15:22. Paul's words "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" are sometimes taken to mean that all will eventually be saved. But that isn't what Paul said. He declared the simple truth that just as every person dies because he is united with Adam as a member of the sinful human race by natural birth, so every person who is united with Christ shall experience a glorious resurrection. We did nothing to become a member of the human race, but we must believe on Christ and be born again to enter Christ's family. We who have done this are now "in Christ" and therefore recipients of eternal life.

Colossians 1:20. Paul declared that God's purpose is "to reconcile all things to Himself . . . through the blood of His cross." Standing by itself, this seems to teach that eventually every creature will be brought into

As much as we would like to think that ultimately all will be saved, we cannot honestly use the Bible to build a case for it.

a saving relationship with God. William Hendriksen quotes a minister who used this verse as the basis for the following statement: "In the end everybody is going to be saved. I have hope even for the devil."

But when we interpret this verse in the light of the many passages that clearly

distinguish between a resurrection to condemnation and a resurrection to blessedness, we see Colossians 1:20 as teaching that through the blood of the cross God provided for the restoration of the whole universe to the harmony He intended for it—the harmony that was broken through sin. The day is coming when all creatures will be brought into subjection to God. They will acknowledge the authority of the triune God and submit to Him. They will confess the lordship of Christ to the glory of the Father (Phil. 2:10-11). In the case of the evil spirits and unredeemed human beings, this subjection will be imposed, not welcomed. On the other hand, the good angels and redeemed people will submit joyfully and rejoice in the fact that rebellion has ceased and a new harmony exists in God's universe.

No, as much as we would like to think that ultimately all will be saved, we cannot honestly use the Scriptures to build a case for it.

The “Destruction” Passages. Having pointed out the solemn fact that the Bible does not give us reason to look for a second chance for salvation after death, we are now ready to consider the implications of the word *destruction* when used to describe the destiny of the wicked and unbelieving. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9, for example, we are told that those who refuse to know God and to obey the gospel “shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord.” The word here is *olethros*, the same word used in 1 Corinthians 5:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:3, and 1 Timothy 6:9.

Jesus made the solemn

declaration, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28).

The Greek word here for “destroy” is *apollumi*. It occurs scores of times in the New Testament. Jesus used this term when He said that new wine would “ruin” an old wineskin (Lk. 5:37) and when He referred to the food we eat as “the food which perishes” (Jn. 6:27).

The fact that the Greek terms sometimes rendered “destroy” or “perish” can mean “to bring to an end” or “cease to exist” has led some Bible students to say that the unsaved will be resurrected, judged, punished according to their works, and then annihilated. They point out that the doctrine of human immortality comes from Greek thought rather than the Hebrew or Greek

Scriptures. Paul declared that God “alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16). These Bible scholars are well aware of our Lord’s statement that the unredeemed go into “everlasting punishment” (Mt. 25:46). But they see eternal extinction as eternal punishment, pointing out that Jesus didn’t say eternal *conscious* punishment.

These teachers, however, are not simple annihilationists. They take seriously the Bible verses that speak of the resurrection, judgment, and appropriate punishment of the lost. But they believe that the eventual destiny of the unsaved will be extinction. They view hell as a grim reality. They recognize that the terms *destroy* and *destruction* can mean more than annihilation. They declare that “the fire will

not be quenched” until God has vindicated His holiness in the punishment of all sin. However, they look forward to a point in eternity after which nothing sinful or painful will exist in the entire universe.

Most orthodox Bible scholars have not accepted this teaching. They have difficulty equating “eternal punishment” with “eternal nonexistence.” They also think of mankind in God’s image as created for an eternal conscious destiny in either heaven or hell.

The “Forever and Ever” Passages. We have shown that the Bible does not promise or even imply that the lost will have another chance for salvation after death. We have also observed that the Greek words translated “perish” or “destroy” in relation to hell can either denote eternal conscious ruin or eventual extinction of being. So it’s

important for us to consider the Greek terms that are usually translated “everlasting,” “eternal,” or “forever and ever” in the Bible. In relation to hell, do they really denote endlessness? And do they indicate that the lost will endure conscious punishment throughout all eternity?

In view is the Greek word *aion* (usually rendered “forever” or “eternal”) and the Greek expression *tous aionas ton aionon* (normally rendered “forever and ever”). In and by themselves, they do not necessarily denote eternity. When Jewish scholars translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek, they used the term *aion* to denote the “everlasting hills” of Genesis 49:26 and to depict the servant who voluntarily had his ear pierced to indicate that he wished to remain with his master

“forever” (Dt. 15:17). Paul counseled Philemon to receive Onesimus back as his slave “forever” (Phile. 15). In all of these cases,

In relation to hell, do the terms translated “everlasting,” “eternal,” or “forever and ever” really indicate an endless conscious punishment throughout all eternity?

the word *aion* relates to this world only, not to eternity. But the same term was also used to depict God as the eternal One, “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 41:13; 90:2; 106:48). It is obvious that the context must determine when this

term denotes a span of time and when it denotes absolute endlessness.

Kittel's *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament* tells us that when *aion* is used in any of its forms in relation to this world, it denotes the "time or duration of the world." But when used of God or the world entered at death, it denotes "timeless eternity." The Greek mind basically thought in terms of two ages—the present age that will end and the future age that is timeless. The New Testament writers "borrowed" this usage. Whenever they used the word *aion* in relation to God, spiritual realities, or life after death, they had absolute timelessness or never-ending eternity in mind (see Vol.1, pp.197-209).

The words *aion* and *aionion* are used several times in relation to the fate of those who die in unbelief

or rebellion. Jesus declared that after His judgment of the nations the lost will "go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt. 25:46). Of the people who will worship the Antichrist and his image, we read, "And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night" (Rev. 14:11). In addition, the beast, the false prophet, and Satan will be cast into the lake of fire, where "they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev. 20:10).

The Greek word translated "tormented" in these last two verses is *basanizo* which, according to the lexicons, denotes physical or mental distress, torture, or harassment. Only conscious beings can suffer this way. Therefore, we must conclude that eternal conscious suffering is

denoted in these passages.

In summary, the future of those who die as unbelievers or rebels is not pleasant to contemplate. When Jesus talked about hell, He spoke of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 8:12), of “the fire that shall never be quenched” (Mk. 9:43,45), and of a place “where their worm does not die” (Mk. 9:44,46,48). Even if many verses are inconclusive regarding the eternal *conscious* suffering of the lost, Revelation 14:11 and 20:10 indicate that at the very least, some of the lost will suffer conscious torment for all eternity.

We must be careful that we do not go beyond the Scriptures and portray hell as a place where all the lost will scream in pain forever and ever. This picture gives a wrong impression of God. He is not only perfectly holy and just, but He will be absolutely fair in

punishment. Jesus pointed out that on the day of judgment the inhabitants of ancient Sodom would be treated with more mercy than the people in Judea who had deliberately rejected Him and His apostles (Mt. 10:15). He also spoke of the servant who would be punished

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lightly because he had little knowledge of God’s will (Lk. 12:48).

C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Great Divorce*, pictures the lost as having to live with themselves and one another unchanged from what they were on earth. He portrays them as moving slowly and inexorably

farther and farther from reality through eternity. He admitted that his work was not a theological treatise and didn't want it to be interpreted as such. But he wanted to make us realize that even if there were no extreme physical pain, hell would be a terrible place. It is a fact that actions form habits and habits develop character. Unless a person has been born again through faith in Christ, he will go into eternity with a nature that has been fixed in this life. He dies a sinner and will be a sinner forever, but he will be unable to carry out his evil thoughts or inclinations. He will be in torment, but his nature will be so twisted by his evil desires that he will prefer the misery of hell to the kind of activities that occupy the saints in heaven.

It is perhaps wise for us to avoid excessive speculation about the

suffering of hell. We can't understand the concept of eternity. And we don't know just what the bodies of the unredeemed in hell will be like. The biblical doctrine of hell is designed to warn sinners. It is designed to motivate believers to do all they can to reach people with the gospel. It is designed to show us how terrible sin is in the sight of an awesomely holy God. Therefore, although we cannot visualize either the timelessness of eternity or the exact nature of hell's suffering, we can be moved to godly fear and proper action. And we can ultimately trust God to do what is right by friends and relatives who for one reason or another refuse the gospel. With Abraham of old we can ask the rhetorical question, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25), and leave the matter to Him.

WHAT'S THE FATE OF THOSE WHO NEVER HEAR?

Many people have gone through this life without even once hearing about Jesus Christ. Even among those who live in cultures where Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter are observed, there are multitudes who never really hear the gospel. And some who have had contact with professing Christians never give Jesus Christ serious consideration because of what they see in the lives of people who claim to be His followers.

What about such people who will die without ever having heard a clear presentation of the gospel? Can we assume that God will find some way to open the doors of heaven to them? We would like to believe that.

But the Scriptures make it clear that those who haven't heard the gospel are lost just as surely as those who refuse to believe on Christ. Jesus declared that He Himself is the only way to God (Jn. 14:6). Peter boldly told the Jewish rulers who had arrested him, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under

Can we assume that God will find a way to open the doors of heaven to those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ?

heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Paul referred to all who don't know Jesus as "those who are perishing" (2 Cor. 4:3) and described

the Gentile world before the time of Christ as “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). The heartbreaking fact is that people who have never heard the gospel are on their way to a Christless eternity.

God will hold those who never heard the gospel responsible for what they did with the light that they had in this world. Paul said of the pagans that God had revealed Himself to them in nature (Rom. 1:18-21) and in conscience (Rom. 2:12-16). They must give an account of what they did with this light and will be punished accordingly.

Sir Norman Anderson, a respected evangelical, has pointed out that some who never hear the gospel become conscious of their sinfulness, abandon all efforts to earn God’s favor, and cry out for forgiveness. He contends that they are to be viewed in the same

situation as most of the Old Testament believers who were saved by God’s grace through faith even though they had only a vague concept of Christ. He writes, “The believing Jew was accepted and blessed not because of the prescribed animal sacrifices he offered, nor even his repentance and abandonment to God’s mercy, but because of what God Himself was going to do in His only Son at the cross of Calvary” (*Christianity And World Religions: The Challenge Of Pluralism*, 1984, p.153).

It’s not imperative that we accept Anderson’s suggestion, because the Bible doesn’t tell us about the fate of these “noble” pagans. But we can be certain about one thing: We can trust God to do right by all those who die without having heard the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. And that is all we need to know!

THE FIRE OF HELL

The term *fire* is often used in connection with the punishment of the lost. In Revelation 20, the expression “lake of fire” occurs three times to denote the final destiny of God’s enemies.

Fire is also associated with hell because of the Greek word *gehenna*, the term most often employed to denote the place where the lost will go after death and judgment. It occurs 11 times in the gospels and once in the rest of the New Testament (Jas. 3:6). The word itself referred to “the valley of Hinnom,” just south of Jerusalem. It was there that the Israelites under Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6) placed children on a fiery altar dedicated to the god Molech. The specific place where this was done was

called Tophet (literally “fire place”). There is a strong tradition that the valley became a city dump where refuse and the bodies of criminals were burned. The terrible reputation of this valley plus its association with fire and judgment made it an apt symbol for the place of final punishment for the wicked.

So should we portray hell as a literal furnace of fire where all the lost will scream in pain throughout all eternity? The Church Fathers, Luther, Calvin, all the classical theologians, and present-day evangelical leaders like Francis Schaeffer and J. I. Packer say an emphatic no. They point out that God will lightly punish those who did not know much about His expectations (Lk. 12:48). A hell in which all burn in a literal fire does not allow for significant degrees of punishment.

Then too, it's important to remember that the Bible often uses *fire* as a symbol. In 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, our works (or doctrines) are portrayed as "wood, hay, straw" that will be consumed by the fire of judgment or as "gold, silver, precious stones" that will endure the fire. In James 3:5-6 the tongue is a "fire," causes "fire," and is itself "set on fire by hell." Hebrews 12:29 declares that "our God is a consuming fire." Jude 23 speaks of people who have been doctrinally misled and are in need of being snatched "out of the fire." In all of these references, the fire is symbolic.

The Bible presents a literal hell as the place of eternal punishment for all who die in unbelief or rebellion. Unscriptural and repulsive overstatements about hell have turned some people away from the

gospel. Such excesses have also caused some true believers to ignore the biblical teaching about hell or to develop false doctrines

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like universalism. But a sensitive and accurate treatment of this truth can be used by God to strengthen Christians and to awaken sinners to their need of Christ.

TRUST GOD TO DO RIGHT

The woman was convinced that she was a sinner who needed God's forgiveness. She also believed the good news that Jesus died on the cross for her sins and destroyed the power of death through His resurrection. But she balked when I suggested that she receive Jesus as her Savior. She said she wasn't sure she wanted to go to heaven if her parents were in hell. They had been churchgoing, loving, honest people. But she didn't think they had ever heard the gospel clearly presented.

Sensing her resistance, I said, "Neither you nor I know for sure where your parents will spend eternity. It's possible that they believed Jesus died for their sins and trusted Him to save them. But we can

be sure of one thing—God will do right by them. Trust Him and do what He says. Receive Jesus as your Savior." She did, and today she is a strong Christian woman.

We don't like the idea of eternal punishment. We may even find ourselves repulsed by the concept. But we need to be careful. God sees and understands infinitely more than we do.

He has proven His love in so many ways, especially providing salvation through Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8). He wants you to place your trust in His Son. Listen to Him, accept His salvation, and trust Him to do what is right to you and to all mankind. Accept His warning to escape "the fire that shall never be quenched—where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' " (Mk. 9:44,46,48).

DEFINING OUR TERMS

Annihilationism—the idea that people will not suffer eternal conscious torment in hell but will eventually be consumed or obliterated in judgment, ceasing to exist.

Beast—the violent and aggressive endtime person, also known as the Antichrist, who will deceive the nations before being sentenced by God to everlasting torment.

Damned, condemned—the terrible state of those sentenced to eternal separation from God.

Destruction—to be ruined or consumed. The word is used repeatedly in the Bible to describe God's plan to bring His enemies first to the grave and then ultimately to the fires and darkness of hell.

Devil/Satan—the powerful personal spirit being who through pride and hatred has become the chief adversary of God and will lead countless

fallen angels and humans to rebellion and a destiny of eternal punishment.

Evangelicals—a label describing those who accept the good news that Jesus is the Christ, the only Son of God, who lived a perfect life, died for our sins, was buried, and rose again on the third day to offer eternal life to all who would believe in Him.

Evil—the absence or opposite of good, love, and godliness; a condition of spiritual independence that resists God's plan for us.

False Prophet—the endtime person who will use supernatural power to bring honor to the Antichrist before joining him in a place of everlasting torment.

Fear Of God—a healthy dread of resisting or rebelling against God, with the result of moving toward God rather than away from Him. Properly understood, it is reverential awe that results in trust and love for God.

Gospel—the good news that Christ died for our sins, that He was buried, and that He rose from the grave to save all who will trust Him.

Hell—the place of final judgment created for the devil, his angels, and all who die without making peace with God. Described as the lake of fire and a place of outer darkness where the torment is characterized by weeping and gnashing of teeth.

New Age—a current world-view that sees man as being one with the spiritual life-force of the universe, capable of shaping his own destiny through the development of mind and potential.

Soul—the immaterial part of man that includes the intellect, emotion, and will. It exists with or without the body.

Pagan, Sinner, Wicked, Lost—terms describing those who, for lack of faith in Christ, are outside the circle of His forgiveness and life.

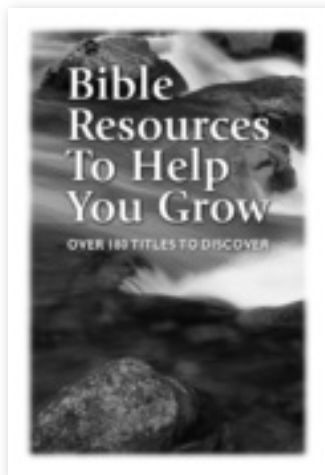
Salvation—the rescue God offers us. It may refer to deliverance from temporary physical harm, but in the highest sense it speaks of God's loving offer to save us from the past, present, and future effects of sin. It is available only in the name of Christ, who gave His life to save all who trust Him to deliver them from eternal separation from God.

Self-righteous—a term that describes one who thinks he is good enough to merit heaven by personal effort rather than by believing that goodness is a gift of God received through faith in Christ.

Universalist—one who believes that everyone will eventually be saved and brought into a right relationship with God.

Wrath Of God—the perfect and patient anger of God that will consume all who persistently and finally refuse to acknowledge His rightful place in their lives.

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