

Appendix B

The Second Death

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First let me point out that since we can reasonably remove from the discussion of hell all passages in the Bible which mention Sheol in the Hebrew Bible and Hades in the Greek New Testament, for those are references to the grave/place of the dead, and also Gehenna, which I have written about elsewhere (www.curtishtucker.com), we are only left with a small handful of passages to consider. I am referring to the five passages on the “second death, the lake of fire.” As a side note, it seems very interesting to me that, with so few passages on what many believe refer to hell, Christian theology has such a heavy emphasis on the subject of hell. That aside, let’s consider the topic of the second death.

Broach the topic of the second death, the lake of fire, and without question we have many questions:

- What is the second death?
- How long does the second death last?
- What is the purpose of the second death?
- Is the second death a geographical location or other dimension?
- Is the second death material or immaterial?
- Who goes to the second death and for how long?
- Where is the second death, the Lake of Fire?

With so many questions...we want answers!

But we have to be very careful to only accept or give answers that the verses provide. I made assumptions about these verses for far too many years, and I taught those assumptions as if they were the confident answers that God Himself had given. Unfortunately, I just did not realize how hollow and flimsy these presupposed and assumed answers really were...until now. I know plenty of people that continue to act and teach like they have the answers, which they tightly hold and passionately defend, which now leave me scratching my head asking myself: *Where in the hell (pun intended!) did they come up with that?*

You and I can assume anything we want and then try to find support for our assumptions and presuppositions. With a little creative logic we will be able to find a verse that seemingly and undeniably supports our assumptions. I, for one, no longer want answers that are derived from assumptions or presuppositions, even if that answer is popular or widely accepted. I only want the answers the passages themselves provide since I think that is all that God intended when He gave us His revelation on these topics. This is true concerning every subject and should therefore be sufficient...even if we still have many unanswered questions. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote,

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”¹

Let us seek for the answers, but live the questions that remain unanswered.

We seek to know what is knowable and live the questions to which we do not find answers. This is a presentation of my observations and considerations on the knowable and unknowable facts of the second death, the lake of fire. I am not saying that I have made all the observations or even made the correct interpretations so this is a living document (study) which may change the longer I consider and contemplate this topic.

Our task, once the observations and thoughts are considered, is to compare and consider whether the answers which are given in the passages on the second death, the lake of fire, accurately resemble or corroborate our theological notions of hell as an unending eternal place of punishment and separation from God. One request I have of you, the reader: Open your minds and hearts, and your theological box, so the passages can be objectively considered. Someone once said that theology is our minds' way of trying to control God. God is far too big for your box...and most people at some time or another find that the box of their theology in which they have tried to control God is vacant!

Here are the passages and some observations to consider.

The first passage...

¹ Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet; Letter #4

Revelation 2:11

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”

What we know:

- This is the first place in the whole Bible where the second death is mentioned.
- This is a promise given to the church for the “one who overcomes.”

The verb is *nikaō* means to be victorious, to win, or to prevail.

- The second death has the ability to “hurt.”
- The promise is to not be hurt by the second death.
The Greek word is *adikeō* and has a range of meaning: to wrong, to injure, or to harm. In Revelation it is used to do harm unjustly (cf. Rev. 9:4, 10)
- This is an emphatic statement evidenced by the use of a double negative and can be translated as “by no means be hurt” or to “never be hurt.”

What we do *NOT* know:

- The fate of those who do NOT overcome.
- The conditions which must be met by the one who overcomes.
- The purpose of the harm caused by the second death.
- The length/duration of second death.
- The location or timing of the second death.

Thoughts for Consideration:

Since this is the first time anywhere in the Bible that the “second death” is mentioned, we may conclude that since no explanation is provided the readers would already have some knowledge of the second death or that they would have adequate understanding after reading the rest of the revelation.

Since this is a promise given to those who overcome within the church, it is possible that the immediate application for the church at Smyrna would have been to their impending suffering which must be overcome, specifically the testing which they will encounter from the devil and tribulation (Rev. 2:10). From reading the remainder of the Revelation of Jesus Christ we learn that during the Tribulation some will not worship the beast and his image, nor take his number on their heads. These are said to be “those who come off victorious” (the verb *nikaō*

again, Revelation 15:2). If it is reasonable to connect these verses, it is safe to conclude that one element of overcoming in any age, during the church age or the age of the Tribulation, is resistance to the devil. This is the perseverance of the saints (Revelation 14:11-12).

Since this is a promise to the church, if we connect the promise of Revelation 2:11 (not to be hurt by the second death) along with all the other promises given to overcomers in the churches (Rev. 2:7, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) with Revelation 21:7 which reads, “He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son,” we may safely conclude that promises to overcomers, in either the church age or the Tribulation, are rewards for their perseverance in the faith. It is also reasonably possible that those who do not overcome are “the cowardly and unbelieving (unfaithful) and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake of fire that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8).

But we must be careful here. Just because it is indicated that the overcomer will not be hurt, this does not necessarily mean that those who do not overcome will be hurt by the second death. It is a possible implication, but it is not clearly indicated so this conclusion should be held loosely. If I was to say that baseball players who hit above 350 will not suffer being sent down to the minor leagues, this would not mean that players who hit less than 350 would automatically be going to the minor leagues. The admonition is to overcome in the face of serious threats from the devil and the trials and tribulations of life.

Overcoming is about persevering in faith(fullness) and is the basis of His judgment and reward which are always determined by “what he has done” (Rev. 22:12), not by what he simply believed. I wonder if this is what Paul is getting at in Col. 3:25 where he writes that the one who does wrong will be wronged. Jesus said, in this very revelation, “let the one who does wrong still do wrong; and let the one who is filthy, still be filthy...” (Rev. 22:11). Since this is the basis of reward, not relationship, He goes on to say “Behold I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done” (Rev. 22:12). Thus the harm that is done by the second death is somehow or another connected to the loss of rewards. It seems very reasonable then that there might be some connection with what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:13 that “each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work...if any

man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.”

However these are assumptions made where no clear indication is given...so we hold loosely to them.

Now the next passage...

Revelation 19:20²

“And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone.”

What we know:

- The context indicates that this takes place chronologically at the end of the Tribulation (70th week of Daniel) just prior to the establishment of Christ's kingdom upon this earth.
- The beast and false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire.
- These two are thrown in alive.

What we don't know:

- We do not know the duration of their experience in the second death.
- We do not know the purpose.
- We are not told that these two who are thrown in alive actually die, are annihilated, or live.

Thoughts for consideration:

We know that the only people mentioned here who are thrown in the lake of fire are the beast and the false prophet. There have historically been a number of suggestions as to the identity of both persons, and despite many difference in opinions many agree that they are human beings who will experience the “hurt” of the lake of fire alone with the devil during this future time of judgment. Thus we may conclude that the second death is a place for mortal human beings.

² While this passage does not use the proper name: second death, it does refer to it as “lake of fire...”

We do not know the duration or the purpose of their experience in the second death. Since their duration in the lake of fire is not stated, to conclude that it is eternal (unending) punishment is unnecessary.

Next passage...

Revelation 20:6

“Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.”

What we know:

- This is a promise to those who take part in the 1st resurrection.
- The reward for those resurrected is that they will reign with Christ for a thousand years during His kingdom upon the earth.
- The second death has a power, but that power is not explained.
The word translated power is *exuousia* which means “authority” or “power over.”

What we don’t know:

- This passage does not explicitly tell us about the fate of those who do not take part in the first resurrection.
- The timing of the second death.

Thoughts for Consideration:

Here the second death could be considered contemporaneous with the Kingdom making it synonymous with Gehenna. However, it could be that those who are not resurrected (the unfaithful, wicked, unrighteous) experience resurrection at the end of the 1,000 years and then will go to the second death and since these here take part in the first resurrection they are not included in this group or their consequent.

It is not only possible, but very reasonable, that the first resurrection is a privilege given to the faithful (believing) who have earned the right to reign with Christ and enjoying eternal life: the kingdom of Messiah (Dan. 12:2; Phil 3:11-14). See also Philippians 3:10-14.

Next passage...

Revelation 20:10

“And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

What we know:

- Here we see that these three (devil, beast, and false prophet) will be tormented day and night forever and ever, but “forever and ever” literally means “ages and ages”. This does not absolutely prove that the duration of sentence of second death is eternal.
- This will take place at the end of the thousand year reign of Christ upon this earth.
- Torment is a stated result or consequence.

What we don’t know:

- We do not know the exact duration of ages and ages.
- We do not know the purpose of the torment.

Thoughts for consideration:

The duration of the judgment is said to be “forever and ever” which most assume means for all eternity. However, we must be cautious in interpreting the phrase *tous aiōnas* (*accusative plural*) *tōn aiōnōn* (*genitive plural*) to mean “eternity” when it simply means “ages of ages” as an indefinable duration of time. *The Theological Workbook of the Old Testament* establishes the point that there is no word in either Hebrew or Greek that denotes the same meaning as the English words “eternal” and “eternity.” It is an unsubstantiated assumption that the Greek term is synonymous to our English term although it COULD mean that in a practical sense IF the context demanded it. The phrase literally means: ages and ages. In other words, the idea is simply “for a very long, very long time.” But it always refers to a period of time and not to eternity.

This passage says that they will be tormented “day and night,” but eternity, whatever it is (time ad infinitum or something), does not have day and night, for in the new heavens and new earth in the New Jerusalem, there is no night (Rev. 21:23-25).

The word translated “torment” is the Greek word *basanizō* which can mean torment or afflict, but interestingly this word comes from *basanos* which meant a rubstone which tested the genuineness of metals (e.g., “torture the gold with fire”). In a legal sense, it is “of torture in judicial examination” (BAGD, p130). It was used in the sense of “to be put to the torture, for the

purpose of extorting confession...”(Liddell- Scott Greek-English Lexicon). Is it possible then that the purpose of the torment of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet was to extort a confession? This would make sense with the future expectation found in the words of Isaiah and Paul that “every knee will bow and tongue will confess” (Isa. 45:23; Phil. 2:10-11).

Next passage...

Revelation 20:14-15

“And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone was not written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

What we know:

- Death and Hades are to be cast into the lake of fire.
- Anyone, whose name was not found written in the book of life, is also thrown into the lake.

What we don't know:

- No timeframe is given to indicate the duration of the experience.
- No indication is given of purpose of the second death.
- No reason is given for a person's name not being in the book of life.
- We do not know if the names were never written in this book or if they were written in and later erased.
- We do not know the conditions for either having a name written in or erased out the book. [Doesn't this repeat the third point above?]

Thoughts for consideration:

We know that Hades is the place of the dead (including the grave), and death is either: physical or spiritual. Is this the fulfillment of “death swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15)? If death is thrown into the second death, does this mean that this is the place of the death of death? If so then this would make sense with the promise that in the New Heaven and New Earth there “is no more death” (Revelation 21:4).

We are not told whether the Lamb's Book of Life (Rev. 13:8; 21:27) is the same as the “book of life” (Rev. 3:5; 17:8; 20:15). It seems reasonable that some never have their name written in the book of the life of the Lamb (Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 21:27). It also seems reasonable that once a name is written in the book, there always remains a potential to have that name erased or

blotted out God's book (see Psalm 69:28; Rev. 3:5). Which one is it? We are not given that answer.

In the revelation of the New Jerusalem, we are told that "...nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the book of life of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:27). But a more exact literal translation of the Greek [εἰ μὴ οἱ γεγραμμένοι ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου] [Greek font is screwed up] is "if not (or "unless, except") the ones written in the book of life of the Lamb." Thus it is special access to the New Jerusalem which is the right of those whose names are written in the book of life of the Lamb. A possible implication of this is that those whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb are denied access into the New Jerusalem. Does this mean they are on the New Earth or that the second death is on the new earth? It certainly makes me wonder.

Next passage...

Revelation 21:8

"But for the cowardly and unbelieving (or "unfaithful") and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

What we know:

- Certain people who are characterized by these particular vices have a part in the second death.
- This statement comes in the context of the description of the New Heaven and New Earth, and the New Jerusalem.

What we don't know:

- We do not know from which age (present age, age of the tribulation, or messianic age/kingdom) that these people proved to be characterized as such resulting in their part in the second death.
- We do not know how long these types of people will remain in the second death.
- We do not know the purpose for which they have a part in the second death.
- We do not know what exactly their "part" is.

Thoughts for consideration:

Is it possible that the list of people whose lives are characterized by such sinful and rebellious patterns, given in this verse, describes those who lose the right to enjoy the New Jerusalem? In Revelation 22:14-15 we are told that those who have the right to the tree of life, which is inside the New Jerusalem, and may enter into the city are blessed, while “outside (the city) are the dogs and sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.” Is being outside the city the same thing as the second death as described in Revelation 21:8? Is outside the city being separated from God’s presence for all eternity? Is this a different location or dimension than that of the New Heavens and the New Earth, or is it within this apparent new dimension? If it is within the new creation, does this mean they have to stay there, or can they travel to other places?

When all is said and done...

As you can hopefully see, there is so very little to be dogmatic about here.

I am no longer willing (or able) to be dogmatic on the nature of, purpose of, or timing and duration of the second death. It seems that the emphasis and purpose of the Revelation of Jesus Christ is to encourage and admonish faithfulness (not just an initial moment of faith) so that He can reward all those who have proven faithful with blessings and privileges in the New Heaven, the New Earth, and the New Jerusalem. Revelation 22:19 gets at this point, “and if anyone takes away from the words of this book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.”

It is my understanding that the only way to participate in the fullness of the salvation (which is about what God is doing to establish His kingdom upon this earth...within time!) God intends for His creatures is to access Him through His Son, Jesus Christ, through faith and faith alone...and to do so continually as they walk intimately with Him. The big question we wrestle with in our Protestant boxes is how exacting must your faith be with respect to Christ? Or to ask that in a little different way: How messed up can you be in your Christology and Soteriology and still escape hell? The love of God has been manifested and poured out in Jesus Christ; if certain people reject this love they will certainly experience the consequences of their own choosing. And God knows how, and for what duration and purpose, the best way is to administer that!

Would it be wrong for God to punish people in hell? I don’t think so. Would it be wrong for God to make the duration of that punishment for all eternity? I don’t think so, *but it does*

seem a bit disproportionate that a person, any person, could spend eternity in punishment for a short life on earth, even if that short life was lived in sin and rebellion. I think it is also safe to suggest that God could make the second death temporary (limited in duration) and reformative.

If we allow the verses to determine the meaning for us, then we must conclude that the second death is the remuneration for wrongdoing (unfaithful living). The second death is what a person earns for serving the devil and his agenda. This is the ultimate wage of sin. It is not about right beliefs *per se*, yet faith is necessary to serve God in righteousness. Avoiding the second death is not the result of a onetime moment of belief to have your ticket punched in order for you to go to heaven. It is not that easy or simple. Apparently what determines one's "part in the second death" is whether his life was characterized by servitude to sin and/or Satan or whether he overcame and stayed faithful to God.

It is possible that the second death is a "locale" in eternity where the people who wasted and squandered their whole lives during their time upon earth will pay what they owe and not be allowed to participate in some of the finer privileges of the New Jerusalem. Will this go on forever (even in eternity) with no change? I doubt it, but it is not clearly indicated. Why do I doubt? Because an eternity to pay for a misuse of sixty to seventy years on earth, even if every one of those years was lived in rebellion to God, is not in my calculations proportionate. This is conjecture for sure, but it is conjecture based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

So what are we left with? A few answered questions. Many unanswered questions. Now the question will be: what assumptions will you make? I feel comfortable making some assumptions, albeit with a very loose grip on them. And in all reality there are only three main tracts of assumptions. Some people will assume that despite the unknowable and unanswered, it is safe to assume that the duration of the second death is eternal or unending and that it is a punishment for a life of rebellion and rejection of God. Others will assume that those who go to the second death are punished, but their punishment terminates in annihilation of both body and soul. The final assumption, which is where I lean, is that the second death is not eternal and has remedial or reformative purposes from a God who is holy, righteous and LOVING.

What assumptions will you make?

Can you live the questions?