Personal Eschatology

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Personal Eschatology

Personal eschatology is the theological study of what happens to a person after death. Where as cosmic eschatology addresses issues about the kingdom of God, the woes of messiah, the sequence and timing of end-time events and the nature of the millennium, personal eschatology addresses more individual questions, such as:

What does it mean to die?
What happens to humans between death and resurrection?
Is there a relationship between the living and the dead in Christ?
How will people be assessed by God after death?
What is the nature of the eternal state?

To be sure, many of the answers to these questions cannot be finalized, since the Bible does not attempt to address all facets about which we might inquire. Concerning a number of such issues Christians have held differing opinions. Nevertheless, the Bible is not silent about such things, and it offers insight into this unseen future.

What is death?

In the Bible, death is the normal end of earthly existence. At death, the "essence" of life (נֶפֶשׁ = **nĕphĕsh**) departs.[1] The death of Rachel, for instance, is described by the phrase "her life left" (Ge. 35:18). The origin of death was a divine judgment after the first humans disobeyed God. God, who gave to the first human his נֶפֶשׁ (Ge. 2:7), threatened to remove it if he disobeyed (Ge. 2:17). Rebellion resulted in judgment by which the human returned to the dust "from whence he came" (Ge. 3:19; Job 17:16; 21:23-26; Ps. 7:5). Thus, humans were prevented

[1] The older English translations usually rendered the word נֶפֶשׁ as "soul," but this translation is too easily confused with Greek metaphysical dualism. Better is the word "life" or "essence". The נֶפֶשׁ in the Old Testament is never the immortal soul, as in Greek thought, but the life principle or the self as the subject of appetite, emotion or volition, cf. *IDB* (1962) 3.428.

from living forever (Ge. 3:22).

In general, however, death is not viewed as the direct result of sin other than as a general judgment passed to all humans (cf. Ro. 5:12). Only on rare occasions is death viewed as a direct judgment (cf. Ge. 38:7, 10; 1 Kg. 22:19-22). A short life span is not necessarily more sinful than a long one, even though a long life is desirable (e.g., Jg. 8:32; 1 Chr. 29:28). Rather, death is the natural end of life (cf. Ge. 5:5; 9:29; 15:15; 25:8, etc.). The power of life and death properly belongs to God (Dt. 32:39; 1 Sa. 2:6; Ps. 68:20; 102:23; 139:16; Is. 38:5; Lk. 12:20). Hence, murder is fundamentally a preempting of God's divine prerogative (Ge. 4:10; 9:5-6; Ex. 20:13; Dt. 5:17).

In the Old Testament, the realm of death is depicted as a shadowy existence in שְׁאוֹל (**sh$^{\check{e}}$ōl** = underworld, abode of the dead).[2] Here those who die descend to some region of confinement where they join their ancestors (cf. Ge. 15:15; 35:29). It is the destiny of all living persons (Job 30:23), sometimes described as a walled city with "gates" (Job 38:17; Is. 38:10; cf. Mt. 16:18). It is a place characterized by silence (Ps. 94:17; 115:17) and gloom (Job 10:21-22; Ps. 143:3; La. 3:6). In contrast to the turbulence of the living world, it also can be a place of rest (Job 3:16-19). Those who exist in this realm sometimes are called רְפָאִים (**r$^{\check{e}}$pă$\hat{\text{i}}$m**), that is, ghosts or shades (Job 26:5; Ps. 88:10; Pro. 9:18; 21:16; Is. 14:9; 26:14).[3] Here they no longer are able to praise God as do the living (Ps. 6:5; 88:12; 115:17-18).

In Jewish literature later than the Hebrew Bible, other ideas about death began to appear. One was that Adam's death penalty was not the cause of all human death, but rather, every human became his own Adam and died for his own sin alone (2 Baruch 54:14-19). Further, the idea developed that the whole person did not die, but only the body, while the soul lived on to await immortality free from the body (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-8; 4:1; 4 Maccabees 16:12-13; 17:11-12), an idea that is essentially Greek.[4] Furthermore, there developed a much sharper distinction between the righteous and unrighteous after death, the righteous

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[2] Again, in the older English versions *sheol* was often translated as "hell", but for most Old Testament texts, the idea of hell should be distinguished from the intertestamental developments. The Hebrew word has no clear etymology, and it seems to have a wide range of meanings, including "death", the "grave", the "next world", etc. In any case, the Old Testament does not describe *sheol* as a place of torment or punishment for the wicked. Rather, it is the place where all the dead are confined away from the land of the living, cf. *ISBE* (1979) 1.900 and 4.472. Even the righteous in the Old Testament expected to enter *sheol* at death (cf. Ge. 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; 1 Sa. 2:6; Job 14:13; 17:13-16; Ps. 16:10; 49:15; 88:3; 116:3; Ho. 13:14).

[3] This word is of Ugaritic origin, cf. *TWOT* (1980) p. 858.

[4] It is hardly surprising that some of these ideas developed in the Hellenistic Period, when Greek culture and ideology prevailed over Palestine.

anticipating resurrection in paradise and the wicked sentenced to eternal death and torment (1 Enoch 102:3b-11; 2 Esdras 7:31-44; Judith 16:17).

The essential character of death as the cessation of earthly life does not change between the Old and New Testaments. Many of the intertestamental ideas about death are ignored by the New Testament writers. However, the destinies of the righteous and wicked, as in the intertestamental literature, are more clearly distinguished in the New Testament, with anticipations of misery for those who reject God and comfort for those who put their trust in him (Mt. 7:13-14; 8:11-12; 11:23-24; 22:13; Mk. 9:44-48; Lk. 16:22-24; 23:43; 2 Co. 5:6-9; Phil. 1:23; 2 Pe. 2:17).

The Intermediate State

If the Bible held forth no promise of a final consummation and final state of affairs for all creation, then a person's final situation could be considered completed at death (as in Greek mythology). However, a constituent part of the Christian hope is resurrection, judgment and the eternal state that follows. This hope in turn raises several questions about the intermediate state, that is, the period of time between death and resurrection. When a person dies, the activities in the living world go on. That history shall not be complete until the second coming of Christ. So, what of the dead in the intervening time?

In the Old Testament, the depiction of the intermediate state as a realm of shadowy existence is assumed. However, there are two passages that bear upon this assumption in unique ways. One is Isaiah's vision of the death of the king of Babylon. When the Babylonian monarch dies, Isaiah envisions the dead who are already in Sheol as welcoming his entrance into the underworld (Is. 14:4, 9a). Here, all the deceased earthly potentates—lesser kings than the great monarch of Babylon—will chide the new arrival by saying, "You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us" (Is. 14:9-10). Sheol has no place for pomp or circumstances, and the king of Babylon is destined for worms and maggots just like everyone else (Is. 14:11).

A second passage is the narrative of Saul's inquiry to the witch at Endor. Hoping to get a prophetic word from Samuel, even though Samuel was dead, Saul engaged a medium to summon the prophet from the underworld (1 Sa. 28:3-11). In the narrative, the witch apparently brings up Samuel, who predicted that Saul and his sons would die in battle on the next day (1 Sa. 28:12-19). This narrative raises several serious questions. Are the dead able to be summoned by the living? Was this apparition really Samuel, or was this some sort of trick? Are the dead, particularly the righteous dead, in some way under the power of evil? Certainly the

practice of summoning the dead was strictly forbidden by the laws of Moses (e.g., Dt. 18:10-13). Peculiarities in the narrative should also be noted. First, the apparition appeared to the woman, but apparently Saul did not see it at first, since she had to explain to Saul what she saw (1 Sa. 28:13-14). Also, when the apparition first appeared, the woman screamed and immediately perceived that Saul was the king, even though he had come in disguise (1 Sa. 28:12). In the context of the séance, Saul and Samuel had a conversation, and it is unclear whether this was mediated (i.e., with the woman conveying Samuel's and Saul's words back and forth) or direct. In short, this is a strange passage, and Christians have wrestled with it for many centuries. Some of the church fathers suggested that the apparition was a demon,[5] but if so, this does not explain how the apparition was able to predict accurately the death of Saul and his sons in the upcoming battle. Others have suggested that such sorcery is only a trick, and nothing actually happens outside the imagination of the seeker, which is why the medium had to explain what she 'saw", even though she saw nothing. Still, the plain meaning of the text does not easily lend itself to such an explanation. Still others offer the solution that Samuel really did appear to Saul, not due to the woman's power, but due to God's power. In fact, the woman's scream might suggest that she was not actually prepared to confront a real Samuel brought back from the dead. In this view, God beat the medium at her own game. In any case, this text carries with it enough ambiguities that little solid ground can be found, and it is better to avoid making this passage bear any great theological weight.

There is no sustained reflection on the intermediate state in the New Testament. Still, the apostolic writers offer scattered but important data that must be considered. Beginning with Jesus, the word παράδεισος (**paradeisos** = paradise, the garden) is used to describe a heavenly existence (Lk. 23:43; 2 Co. 12:4; Rv. 2:7). As a Persian loanword (*pairi-daeza*), this term was adopted by the Jews after the Babylonian captivity. It was used in the LXX to refer to the Garden of Eden in Genesis (Ge. 2:8-10, 16), and this idea of a park or garden was coupled with the eschatological hope of blessedness after death (2 Esdras 4:7; 6:2; 7:36, 123; 8:52; Psalms of Solomon 14; Sibylline Oracles 3:46-48; 2 Enoch 8-9; 3 Baruch 4; Joseph and Asenath 18; 4 Baruch 9). In Jewish thought, the idea of a garden fit well, not only with the original garden of Eden, but also with the imagery of the prophet Isaiah, who anticipated a blessed future for the people of God (Is. 41:18-19; 51:3; 58:11; 60:13). Paradise in Jewish literature sometimes is described as the intermediate abode of the righteous (1 Enoch 37-70), a garden

[5] This explanation apparently was based on the fact that the word used is the Hebrew *elohim* (= god, gods), which the NIV translates as "spirit" or "spirits" or "gods" (mg).

containing the tree of wisdom (1 Enoch 32).[6] In fact, the language of Paul about ascending to paradise in the third heaven has a clear precedent in which a heavenly journey by Enoch is described in a similar manner:

> *They brought me up to the third heaven. And they placed me in the midst of Paradise.*
> (2 Enoch 8:1)

> *I know a man…who was caught up to the third heaven. And this man…was caught up to Paradise.*
> (2 Co. 12:2, 4)

Other New Testament passages that allude to the state of the righteous between death and resurrection come largely from Paul. In the context of anticipating the possibility of his own death (Phil. 1:20-22), the apostle indicated that after death he would be "with Christ" (Phil. 1:23), a state that was the obverse of remaining "in the body" (Phil. 1:24). Further, he says that "as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord," and he looked forward with hope to being "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Co. 5:6-9). Christians who die should not be unduly grieved (1 Th. 4:13), for those who have died in faith await the resurrection in which their mortality will be transformed into immortality (1 Co. 15:50-57). At his second coming, God will "bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (1 Th. 4:14). Presumably, this means that he will bring their spirits in order for there to be a union of their spirits and bodies in resurrection. In turn, this implies that after death but before resurrection, the righteous are with Christ.

One other New Testament passage bears directly upon this subject, the story of Lazarus and Dives (Lk. 16:19-31).[7] The background to this teaching lies in the intertestamental vision of the different fates of the righteous and wicked after death, one a place of blessedness and the other a place of torment. For evangelicals, a rather intense discussion has surfaced over whether or not the story is a parable. The one side emphatically distinguishes this story from Jesus' parables, noting that the word "parable" is not used, while a personal name "Lazarus" is used. Scofield, for instance, treats this story as possibly a specific, historical case.[8] Others point out that the introduction "a certain man" has several

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[6] J. Charlesworth, "Paradise," *ABD* (1992) 5.154-155.

[7] "Dives" is the traditional name for the rich man, though it is a misnomer. In the Latin Vulgate, the opening in Lk. 16:1 is *homo quidam erat dives* (= There once was a rich man), and the word "dives" meant "rich." In time, Dives came to be used as a proper name for the rich man.

[8] *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (footnote at Luke 16:1).

Lukan parallels which are parables (cf. Lk. 12:16; 14:16; 15:11; 16:1; 19:12; 20:9), and further, that in some Greek manuscripts of Luke the word "parable" is used in 16:1.[9] While the literary genre of the story may be moot, the implications can be considerable. Those who prefer that the account *is not* a parable generally also wish to say that this parable describes the actual state of things for those who die. Those who prefer that the account *is* a parable sometimes (though not always) suggest that the imagery of hell is local color, drawn from Jewish apocalyptic literature but not necessarily intended as a precise description of the intermediate state. Further, they argue that if the story is taken literally, then the result is an anachronism in which the torment of fire is applied to the rich man even before his final judgment, while the Book of Revelation shows this torment after the judgment (Rv. 20:14).[10] In any case, they argue, the point of the parable was not to teach about the intermediate state, but to point out that even the return of a messenger from the dead would not be sufficient to effect the reform of the stubborn rich.

Christ's Descent into Hell

The ancient confession in the Apostles' Creed affirms that Christ "descended into hell." This summary statement is drawn from the following several New Testament passages:

> *For as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and nights in the heart of the earth.*
> (Mt. 12:40)[11]
>
> *…you will not abandon me to the grave [= Sheol/Hades]…*
> (Ac. 2:27; cf. Ps. 16:10)
>
> *Do not say in your heart… 'Who will descend into the deep [the abyss]?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).*
> (Ro. 10:6-7)
>
> *What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions.*
> (Ep. 4:9)

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[9] Codex Bezae (5th century), for instance, reads "And he uttered another parable", cf. J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1085) pp. 1126-1127.

[10] W. Liefeld, "Luke," *EBC* (1984) 8.992-993.

[11] It should be remembered, of course, that Jonah's experience, in his own words, was comparable to a descent into *Sheol* (Jonah 2:2, 6).

> *He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison…*
> (1 Pe. 3:18-19)
>
> *For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead…*
> (1 Pe. 4:6)

Many of the ante-Nicene fathers took these passages to mean that after his death Christ preached the gospel to those in hell so that no one who had died before the coming of Jesus would be deprived of hearing it.[12] Whether this preaching was on the order of an announcement of triumph or a "second chance" is unclear. Others hold that the preaching actually occurred through Noah, and the Spirit of Christ was in Noah as he preached to the antediluvians. If so, then there was no "sermon" in hell.[13] However one interprets such biblical texts, they at least mean that Christ descended to the place of the dead, and in fact, in the Roman Catholic tradition the recitation of the creed simply says, "He descended to the dead." Against some Gnostics, who argued that Jesus did not really die, the creedal affirmation, "He descended into hell," is a strong affirmation of the real death of Jesus.

Theories about the Intermediate State

The paucity of material about the intermediate state has engendered several theories among Christians. What is the nature of existence for the deceased between death and resurrection? Three primary theories have been propounded.

The classical Protestant view is that the dead have a conscious existence. As in the story of Lazarus and according to the expectations of Paul, those who die in Christ are comforted in Christ's very presence as they await the *parousia*, when their spirits will be reunited with their bodies (cf. 1 Th. 4:14). The unrighteous dead are held in *Hades*, and if the story of Lazarus and Dives is taken at face value, the unrighteous are consigned to suffering. A possible support to this idea of intermediate suffering comes in 2 Peter 2:9: *the Lord knows how…to hold the*

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[12] Ignatius (died ca. AD 110), for instance, envisioned Christ announcing his triumph to the prophets, cf. *Magnesians* IX.2, as did Tertullian (AD 160?-230?), *Treatise on the Soul* XV. Justin Martyr (AD 100?-165) and Irenaeus (AD 130-200) thought that Christ preached to the deceased in Israel, *Dialogue with Trypho* LXXII.4; *Against Heresies* III.20.4; IV.22.1; IV.27.2, and both attribute this idea to either Isaiah or Jeremiah, though there is no surviving textual tradition as such in either of the books that bear their names.

[13] In fact, this interpretation has become popular enough among evangelicals that one translation (NASB) actually inserts the word "now" in 1 Pe. 3:19 to buttress it, even though there is no such word in the Greek text. Such a rendering is all the more remarkable in a translation that prides itself as taking a more word-for-word approach rather than using dynamic equivalency.

unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.[14] This theory follows the intertestamental idea that the realm of death has two compartments, upper and lower, for the righteous and unrighteous respectively. Of course, such a compartmental division was not part of the Old Testament depiction, so sometimes it is held that the righteous dead were moved to paradise at the death and resurrection of Jesus.[15] The belief in a conscious existence after death is based upon the Old Testament accounts of *Sheol*, Jesus' story of Lazarus, and Jesus' statement with reference to the patriarchs that God is "not the God of the dead but of the living" (Mt. 22:32). The idea of being in the presence of Christ after death usually is taken to mean a state of conscious comfort.

The medieval church developed a further theology about the intermediate state, the doctrine of purgatory. This view is affirmed by the Roman Catholic Church[16], though it has never been fully accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Church and is explicitly rejected by the Protestant Church. Purgatory, in Roman Catholic theology, is conceived as a place of temporal punishment after death for those Christians who die at peace with the church but are not perfect. Only those believers who attain a state of Christian perfection go directly to heaven and are able to receive the beatific vision, that is, the unhindered and immediate vision of God. Most Christians, who are only partially sanctified, go to purgatory where their venial sins (i.e., lesser sins that do not sever one's ties with God) are punished and purged. The time of confinement in purgatory depends upon the amount of sin that needs to be penalized. Also, one's term in purgatory can be shortened by certain actions of the living. Prayers and gifts to the poor can be made in behalf of souls in purgatory, requiem masses (i.e., masses for the dead) can be held for them, and indulgences can be purchased for them. (Indulgences are reprieves based on the idea that some Christians surpass God's requirements during their earthly life, and the excess merits of these saints can then be deposited in the church's "treasury of merits." From this treasury, reprieves from purgatory can be purchased, since the church has the right to dispense such benefits. Purgatory will not be terminated until the last judgment.[17]

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[14] The use of the present participle "being punished" is, in this view, taken to refer to what happens after death but before resurrection, cf. R. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 254. However, it is not entirely clear that this passage refers to people after death, since it also could refer to punishment as a judgment within history during a person's earthly life.

[15] This was the interpretation of C. I. Scofield, for instance (see note at Matthew 27:52). Donald Barnhouse, another dispensationalist, held that "Christ descended into Paradise and on the third day the Lord God brought Him forth and with Him emptied hell of the spirits and souls of all the vast company of the redeemed," *The Invisible War* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), p. 227.

[16] N. Van Doornik et al., *A Handbook of the Catholic Faith* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1956), pp. 460-461.

[17] L. Boettner, *EDT* (1982) p. 897; R. Beckwith, *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S. Ferguson and D. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), pp. 549-550.

Even Roman Catholic theologians frankly admit that this theology is not found in the Bible.[18] In the Deutero-Canonical books (the Apocrypha), there is a reference to Jews in the Maccabean revolt who died in battle, but under their corpses were discovered idolatrous amulets, indicating that these Jews had violated the Torah. Judas Maccabeus and his soldiers prayed for them that their sinful idolatry might be expunged, and he collected money to send to Jerusalem for an expiatory sacrifice in behalf of the dead (2 Maccabees 12:38-45). In this way, it was said that "he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin" (2 Maccabees 12:46). This story becomes the quasi-biblical support for purgatory (and it depends, in turn, on the canonization of the Apocrypha, which was made official at the Council of Trent in the 16th century). In the medieval period, Paul's anticipation that the quality of every person's earthly works will be revealed by fire (1 Co. 3:13-15) came to be applied to purgatory.[19] The notion of purgatory and the sale of indulgences were central in Luther's protest contained in his famous *95 Theses*. For Luther, such ideas undermined the New Testament's clear teachings on justification and sanctification by grace and faith alone.

Yet a third theory about the intermediate state is popularly called "soul-sleep" (also known as psychopannychy). This view, held intermittently throughout church history (e.g., Origen, Luther, the Anabaptists and the Seventh Day Adventists), takes its support from sleep as the widely used metaphor for death in the Bible. If death is a type of sleep in which one is unconscious of the passing of time, then it is argued that the intermediate state also is a state of unconsciousness until the day of awakening when the Lord returns. Human existence depends upon the unity of body and soul, so in this view, if the body ceases to function, then the soul ceases to function as well. Furthermore, if a state of bliss or suffering is to be experienced by the righteous and unrighteous respectively, then such conscious experience preempts the last judgment and makes it unnecessary. If it be argued that Paul's language "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" suggests consciousness, those supporting soul sleep respond that the person who awakes from sleep is not conscious of the intervening passage of time. The presence of Christ will be the first conscious experience at their moment of awakening.

Against the idea of soul sleep, various biblical passages can be cited. The appearance of Moses and Elijah to Christ at the transfiguration seems to require consciousness for at least these two (Mt. 17:3//Mk. 9:4//Lk. 9:30). Jesus' statement about the partriarchs that God is not a God of the dead but of the living implies that

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[18] Van Doornik, p. 461.

[19] R. McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper &Row, 1981), p. 1143. Most contemporary interpreters, on the other hand, take this description as a simple metaphor for the last judgment.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are consciously in the presence of God (Mk. 12:26-27). The story of Lazarus and Dives certainly describes a conscious existence, both for the righteous and the unrighteous (Lk. 16:22-31). Jesus' promise to the dying thief also suggests a conscious bliss immediately after death (Lk. 23:43) as do Paul's statements that the dead in Christ are received into his very presence (Phil. 1:23; 2 Co. 5:8). If the joyful assembly of angels in heaven are accompanied by members of the church (He. 12:23), then any expression of joy requires consciousness. Finally, John's vision of the souls of the martyrs under the heavenly altar who continually pray for retribution upon an evil world seems to require consciousness (Rv. 6:9-11).

Final Judgment

The Book of Hebrews offers the broadest possible statement: …*man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*… (He. 9:27b). In general terms, this judgment results in heaven or hell, for the Bible admits no other alternative than that two destinies await, and every human will receive one or the other. This vision of judgment begins in the Old Testament (Ecc. 11:9; 12:14; Is. 66:12-16; Da. 12:2; Zep. 3:8-13), continues through the teachings of Jesus (Mt. 7:13-14; 13:41-43, 49-50; 16:27; 25:19-30, 46; Mk. 16:16; Lk. 12:35-48) and was reaffirmed in the writings of the apostles (Ac. 24:25; Ro. 2:7-11, 16; 2 Th. 1:6-10; He. 10:26-27; Ja. 2:12-13; Rv. 20:11-15).

God Almighty is the judge of all (Ge. 18:25; 1 Sa. 2:10; Jn. 12:48a; He. 10:30-31; 12:23; 13:4; Ja. 4:12a; 5:9), yet his judgment will be executed through his Son, Christ Jesus (Jn. 5:21-30; Ac. 10:42; 17:31; Ro. 2:16; 2 Ti. 4:1, 8). The purpose of this judgment is not to demonstrate anything to God, for he already knows completely the moral condition of every person (2 Ti. 2:19; Mt. 6:1-5; Jn. 2:24-25). Rather, the object of judgment is to show openly the character and quality of those who are judged (Ro. 2:16; Jude 14-15), to demonstrate the justice of God to whom all humans are accountable (Jn. 8:50; Ro. 3:3-6, 19), and to assign final destinies for all (Mt. 13:41-42; 25:46; Rv. 20:11—21:4).

The Judgment of Believers

Jesus declared, *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved* (Mk. 16:16).[20]

[20] To be sure, Mk. 16:9-20 (the so-called "longer ending" of the four extant endings to Mark's Gospel in the earliest manuscripts) almost certainly was not part of Mark's original gospel. The passage is omitted in the most important early manuscripts, and virtually all scholars agree that the external and internal evidence is decisive, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Society, 1971), pp. 122-126. However, the textual question notwithstanding, the view that this longer ending contains a faithful witness to Jesus' last words and was canonically recognized by the early church can be sustained.

Salvation is the final result for believers, and so Paul says, *We shall be saved from God's wrath* (Ro. 5:9; cf. Phil. 1:28). The Pauline emphasis on this future salvation is that by God's grace believers have been acquitted by faith (Ro. 5:1-2), and in the end, they will certainly be glorified (Ro. 8:28-30). God is "for them" because of the atoning death of Christ, and no condemning charge can be leveled against them, nor can they be separated from God's love (Ro. 8:31-39). They will surely receive eternal life (Ro. 2:7). Hence, the salvation of those who believe is never in question (Jn. 10:27-30; 1 Pe. 1:3-5; 2 Ti. 1:12). It is assured!

At the same time, Jesus and Paul are equally clear that believers will be assessed by God in a final judgment. Jesus taught that what the Father saw in secret he would reward openly (Mt. 6:1, 4, 6). Paul said: *For we will all stand before God's judgment seat… So, then, each of us will give an account of himself to God* (Ro. 14:10-12). In this judgment of believers, Paul indicates that everyone "will receive what is due him for things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Co. 5:10), and also, "Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Ro. 14:12). Such statements were made directly to Christians. Even about himself, Paul says, "It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Co. 4:4b). Further, Paul observes that some people's sins follow them to the judgement, secret sins that would never have been known otherwise (1 Ti. 5:24-25). Since the Bible is clear that believers will certainly be saved, this judgment does not concern salvation or damnation. Rather, it is an assessment of one's Christian life.

In the parable of the vineyard workers, Jesus makes clear that the gift of salvation is the same for everyone, no matter the length of time they had served the Lord on earth (Mt. 20:1-16). In the parables of the talents and the minas, Jesus also indicated that there would be differences of reward, even among those who were faithful (Mt. 25:14-23; Lk. 19:11-19). Those who willingly suffer for their faith do so in order to gain "a better resurrection" (He. 11:35). Paul described this final judgment of believers by the metaphor of fire. Here, the actions, motives and behaviors of believers will be evaluated, and each person's work *will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light* (1 Co. 3:13). The fire of God's judgment will "test the quality of each man's work" (1 Co. 3:13). Those works that survive the test of fire (gold, silver, costly stones) will be rewarded (1 Co. 3:14). Those works that are judged to be inferior will be deemed worthless (1 Co. 3:15a), though Paul is careful to point out that the salvation of the believer is not in question (1 Co. 3:15b). Later, he points out that a critical factor in this final evaluation will be motives (1 Co. 4:5; cf. Phil. 1:18). It is precisely for this reason that Christians must reserve judgment, since God only knows the heart and God alone can assess motives (1 Co. 4:3-5). The imagery of "crowns" or wreaths of victory, metaphors drawn from the familiar rewards of Olympic-style games,

symbolize the rewards of believers (1 Co. 9:25; Phil. 4:1; 1 Th. 2:19-20; 2 Ti. 4:8; Ja. 1:12; 1 Pe. 5:4; Rv. 2:10).

The Judgment of Unbelievers

The destiny of unbelievers is tragic. They will be eternally punished by being separated from the presence of God (2 Th. 1:6-10; cf. Mt. 25:46a). Though resurrected, they will rise to shame and contempt (Da. 12:2). Though Jesus came into the world to save those who would believe, those who do not believe stand under condemnation because of their rejection of God's Son (Mt. 10:14-15; 11:20-24//Lk. 10:10-16; Jn. 3:17-19; He. 2:2-3; 3:18-19). This final state is called "the second death", since those who are so judged died at the end of their earthly life and now die "again" at the end of history (Rv. 20:13-15; cf. Jn. 8:24).

The horror of this final state of unbelief can hardly be calculated. For those who reject truth, are self-seeking and follow evil, there will be divine wrath and anger (Ro. 2:8; cf. Mt. 23:33; 24:48-51). They will be cast into outer darkness (Mt. 8:12; Rv. 22:15) into a fiery furnace (Mt. 13:42; Rv. 20:14; 21:8).

As is true with respect to varying rewards for believers, there also will be degrees of punishment for those who reject God. In the parable of the master and the servants, Jesus indicated that there would be a difference of punishment based upon prior knowledge of the Lord's will (Lk. 12:45-48). Similarly, Jesus denounced the cities of Galilee where most of his mighty works were done, indicating that their judgment would be more severe because of their rejection in the face of privilege (Mt. 11:20-24//Lk. 10:13-16; cf. Mt. 10:15//Mk. 6:11). Paul taught that the stubborn and unrepentant were storing for themselves wrath, for God would give to each person according to what he had done (Ro. 2:5-6). The most severe level of punishment is reserved for those who actively reject God's Son after having been exposed to his goodness (He. 10:26-31).

The Nature of Hell

The biblical imagery used to describe the final destiny of the wicked is of two sorts, and this difference has engendered considerable debate among Christians since the early period of the church. One type of imagery describes this final state as a fiery, eternal furnace, and it is to be found in the Synoptic Gospels, Jude and Revelation. The other type of imagery describes the final state as perishing, destruction and death, and this imagery is to be found in John, Paul and other writers.

The imagery of torture after death has roots in Jewish apocalyptic literature, where the souls of the wicked "wander about in torments, ever grieving and sad" (2

Esdras 7:80). In fact, the "seven ways" are seven degrees or levels of torment (2 Esdras 7:81ff.). The destiny of the wicked is described as a state where the hard-hearted will "curse their days…and multiply in eternal execration" (1 Enoch 5:5-7) and where they will be "harassed by the evil spirit which also it [they] served" (Testament of Asher 6:5). Here, they shall be subject to "darkness, nets, and burning flame" (1 Enoch 103:7), consigned to "an invisible wilderness" where they will "burn with fire" (1 Enoch 108:3). The "place of fire" is for sinners, blasphemers, and those who do evil (1 Enoch 108:5-7). Here is the origin of the Jewish metaphor for *Gehenna*, the Grecianized word for the Valley of Hinnom southwest of Jerusalem that was used as the general garbage dump for the city. As a dump, it continually smoldered and decayed. Once used for idolatrous worship and child sacrifice (2 Chr. 28:3; Je. 7:31), Gehenna came to symbolize the place of final punishment (1 Enoch 54:1-6), an abyss full of fire (1 Enoch 90:26-27) where the wicked go "to the fire and the path that leads to burning coals" (2 Baruch 85:13). Gehenna, therefore, is described as the "furnace of the earth" (Apocalypse of Abraham 14:5) and "the dead house of Tartarus…Gehenna of terrible, raging, undying fire" (Sibylline Oracles 1:100-103). This metaphorical usage tended to separate Gehenna from its geographical location but retain its fiery nature.[21] In teaching to his Jewish constituency, Jesus used the imagery of Gehenna to describe final punishment (Mt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mk. 9:43-49; Lk. 12:5) and James alluded to it also in his letter to Jewish Christians (Ja. 3:6).[22]

The imagery of fire as the condition of eternal judgment passes into other New Testament literature as well (2 Pe. 3:7; Jude 7, 23; Rv. 20:14-15). From there, a considerable tradition developed in Christian apocalyptic literature about the tortures and horrors of this place of punishment. It was described as place where some would be immersed in fiery pits (Apocalypse of Peter 1-6), a place containing "rivers of fire" (Apocalypse of Paul 31-42).[23] The works of Dante in the Medieval Period drew heavily from this tradition.

In addition to the imagery of fire, the New Testament also uses the language of destruction as a description of final judgment. Such language is especially typical of Paul, who says that the fate of those who do not obey the gospel will be

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[21] D. Watson, "Gehenna," *ABD* (1992) 2.927.

[22] The NIV translates γέεννα (= *Gehenna*) as "hell" or "fire of hell", an English rendering that the NIV also uses for ᾅδης (= *Hades*), thus obscuring the distinction between the two. While there was some blurring of the distinction between Hades and Gehenna in Jewish apocalyptic, in the New Testament the two terms do not seem to be used synonymously. Hades is more properly the equivalent to the Old Testament *Sheol*, the intermediate place between death and resurrection, while *Gehenna* more properly refers to final judgment.

[23] Various additional "tours of hell" were described by early Christians and can be traced in M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983).

"everlasting destruction" (2 Th. 1:9). Those opposing the Christian message "will be destroyed" (Phil. 1:28; 3:19). The objects of God's wrath are "prepared for destruction" (Ro. 9:22). At the coming of the Lord, "sudden destruction" will come upon them (1 Th. 5:3). Other New Testament writers also use words signifying destruction (Jn. 3:16; 10:28; Lk. 13:3-5; 2 Th. 2:10; He. 10:39; 2 Pe. 2:1, 3, 12). The ungodly are kept for the "day of judgment and destruction" (2 Pe. 3:7).

Out of these two biblical descriptions—one using the image of everlasting fire and the other the language of eternal destruction—a somewhat heated controversy has developed over the nature of hell. On the one hand, the question has been raised as to whether the imagery of fire in the New Testament is more-or-less the language of "local color", since it was used by Jesus to address people who were familiar with the Jewish literature where the imagery originated. Some have suggested that the visual idea of fire is essentially a metaphor or symbol representing eternal separation from God, but not necessarily a physical description of the actual conditions of the afterlife.

On the other hand, others have raised the question about the meaning of "eternal destruction." Does this mean annihilation—the idea that the wicked would simply be "burned up" and cease to exist—or does it refer to a state of never-ending separation from God, a condition of continually being "destroyed" but without extinction. Related questions are ethical and philosophical. Could God still be described as a God of love if there eternally exists in the universe some dark corner that is beyond his redeeming compassion? Would this not threaten his essential nature and sovereignty? How can eternal torment be a just compensation for a short life-span of evil? Could anyone be so wretchedly evil in less than a hundred years so as to deserve uncalculated trillions of years of horrific torture? For reasons like these, some evangelicals reject a literalistic interpretation of Gehenna.

The debate is an old one stretching backward into the earliest days of Christian history. Justin Martyr and Theophilus of Antioch, for instance, thought that the wicked would become extinct. Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, and Augustine, on the other hand, felt that the wicked would exist eternally in torment. The current literature on the subject by evangelicals has been growing rapidly in the past decade or so.[24] In fact, the controversy had become so edged by

[24] On the traditional side (i.e., eternal punishment in fire), see: J. Gerstner, *Repent or Perish* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1990); L. Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell* (Victor, 1992); R. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: the Case for Eternal Punishment* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995); D. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996). On the annihilationist side, see: J. Stott and D. Edwards, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (InterVarsity, 1988); P. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Eerdmans, 1989); J. Wenham, "The Case for Conditional

the year 2000 that the Evangelical Alliance (a British association of evangelical churches founded in 1846) published a comprehensive treatment of the debate from all sides with the aim of uniting against the notion of universalism (i.e., the idea that in the end everyone would be saved) while at the same time promoting tolerance among fellow evangelicals about the nature of hell.[25] Here, four distinct positions on the subject were analyzed:

Eternal Conscious Physical and Spiritual Torment (The damned will suffer both body and soul in hell forever; the biblical imagery of fire is a literal description of actual eternal conditions for the wicked.)

Evangelical Advocates: John Blanchard, D. A. Carson, Ajith Fernando, John Gerstner, Robert Morey, J. I. Packer, David Pawson and Robert Peterson

Eternal Conscious Spiritual Torment (The damned will suffer spiritual or psychological torment; the biblical imagery of fire is a metaphor or symbol, not a literal description.)

Evangelical Advocates: Murray Harris, Antony Hoekema, Peter Toon, Herb Vander Lugt

Eternal Separation from God (The nature of hell is essentially relational; the terrible fate of the wicked is an eternal loss of communion with God.)

Evangelical Advocates: Kendall Harmon, Peter Head, Alec Motyer and (probably) C. S. Lewis (cf., *The Great Divorce*)

Conditional Immortality and/or Annihilationism (Humans are not inherently immortal; rather, they are granted immortality only when they are saved. Since the unsaved do not have this gift, they will cease to exist after final judgment, and this is the "destruction" of which Paul and others write.)

Evangelical Advocates: Robert Brow, E. Earle Ellis, Edward Fudge, Michael Green, Clark Pinnock, John Wenham and Nigel Wright

In addition to those who in one way or another affirm the horror of a final judgment and separation from God, a long-standing controversy has been waged by defenders of a universal salvation for all people. Throughout church history

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Immortality", *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Baker, 1992); E. Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Paternoster, 1994).

[25] R. Peterson, "Undying Worm Unquenchable Fire," *Christianity Today* (Oct 23, 2000), pp. 30-37.

there have been a number of theologians who have defended some type of universalism, including Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa.[26] In more recent history, some Anabaptists, Baptists and Puritans have accepted the idea, as well as modern thinkers like Jacques Ellul[27] and, according to his critics, Karl Barth.[28] A recent exposition of a type of universalism with a new twist can be found in Neal Punt of the Christian Reformed Church, where he argues that the Calvinist doctrine that all are lost except those whom God elects should be reversed so that all are saved except those whom the Bible directly declares to be lost.[29] However it is elaborated, the view of universal salvation, called *apokatastasis* (= all things), is based on an interpretation of various biblical passages (cf., Lk. 3:6; Jn. 12:31-32; Ac. 3:19-21; Ro. 5:18-21; 8:20-23; Ep. 1:9-10; 1 Ti. 2:4; 4:10; Tit. 2:11; 2 Pe. 3:9; 1 Jn. 2:2).

What should one say in response to all these diverse views? In the first place, one always must bear in mind the obvious truth that any personal viewpoint one holds carries no binding force upon God. At the same time, views such as universalism seem possible only if one brackets out other biblical passages. Reading any collection of biblical texts in isolation from the whole is bound to result in a truncated theology and should be avoided. Hence, universalism seems far too optimistic in light of what the Bible says elsewhere on the subject of damnation. As to the various views about the nature of hell, annihilationism is the one that falls most quickly, again in light of the many other passages that seem to require some kind of eternal existence for both the righteous and the wicked. Among those who argue for an eternal existence separated from God, the exact nature of hell is less clear. Surely if one must err, it would be wisest to err on the side that is more rigorous rather than the side that is more lenient. For simply practical reasons, if for no other, it would be better to believe in a raging hellfire that never goes out, only to discover that hell is less severe, than to urge that there is a leniency in eternity only to find out that, in fact, the awful reality had not been softened! Better to expect hellfire and find it otherwise than to underestimate the suffering of being damned!

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[26] D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 2.214ff.

[27] J. Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 188-209.

[28] Barth, of course, formally denied being a universalist, but his critics continue to level this charge at him.

[29] N. Punt, *Unconditional Good News* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) and *What's Good About the Good News* (Northland Books, 1988).