

HELL?

NO!

A Bible study on why
no one will be left behind

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Which of these is a picture of hell? See inside for the answer.

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Introduction

What is hell and why do people believe in it?

According to the Gallup poll, two-thirds of Americans say they believe in hell, which is about the same number that believe in heaven. However, that poll doesn't reveal the depths of worry and fear about hell or how many have agonized about the ultimate fate of their loved ones? The concern and anxiety can be crushing. Just what is this "hell" that so many throughout the generations have been distressed about?

Hell is conventionally understood by most Christians as a place of eternal punishment and torment for all who die without becoming a Christian. Some see it not as a physical place but a state of being where people are punished unendingly for their sins. A few believe that those in hell are eventually annihilated or cease to exist, rather than undergoing endless torture.

A common belief for many is that hell is for those who have been bad. Others, often labeled "born again" or "evangelical" Christians, claim that people do not go to hell because they have been bad but because they have not accepted Jesus as their Savior who died for their sins.

Why do most Christians embrace these beliefs about today? The answer almost always given is because that is what the Bible teaches. The Old Testament pictures a God who at times is loving and compassionate and, at times, vengeful and punishing. This is the original basis for believing in a God who will punish forever.

Building on this base, there are about a dozen passages in the New Testament which are used today to teach that many, if not most, will be lost forever in an eternal hell because they have not done certain things that would make them acceptable to God, such as trusting in Christ before they die. In addition, there are a few other passages in the New Testament that appear to recall the Old Testament idea of the wrath of God and seem to give credence to the idea of eternal punishment. Popular interpretations of these passages as teaching eternal hell have powerfully made their way into our deepest beliefs and feelings.

However, many do not know that there are more than twice as many passages in the New Testament that say exactly the opposite! These proclaim God's promise to save everyone. No one in all creation will ever be left behind or lost forever. Unfortunately, these "ultimate reconciliation" sections are not as well known as the "eternal hell" ones.

Many Christians are surprised when I quote these “all will be saved” passages. “Those are in the Bible?” they exclaim! “Yes!” I reply, “They are in your Bible, where they’ve been all the time!”

I have found that most traditional interpreters of Scripture take very literally those sections of the New Testament which speak of “eternal” hell and destruction, but they ignore or give non-literal interpretations to the passages that deny the existence of an everlasting hell. They usually respond that these verses which seem to indicate universal salvation for all must be interpreted in light of the passages that seem to say that many will spend eternity in hell.

I suggest that it should be the other way around. The passages that may seem to some to indicate an eternal hell must be understood in light of the ones that teach universal salvation.

Why no one will be left behind.

No one will be left behind in hell for three reasons.

1. In the Bible, Jesus revealed that the character of God is everlasting love, mercy, grace, and compassion. The character of God is not violence, wrath, retribution, punishment, threats, or any kind of force. The only “force” God employs is the enticing power of non-violent, suffering love. Jesus preached “love your enemies” because that is what God does. Jesus taught us that God will never stop loving, blessing, healing, and doing good, even to God’s very own enemies. This leads us to the assurance that God will not rest from God’s one all-consuming purpose – to get everyone home. Our humanly devised hells are not home and, according to Scripture, will ultimately be empty.
2. The New Testament assumes, proclaims, and often shouts that hell will be empty in the many passages that indicate everyone will eventually be saved. The abundance and simple clarity of passages that teach the reconciliation of all is compelling. When compared to the few passages that seem to speak of some kind of “eternal” destruction or hell, it appears that the New Testament is much more inclined to speak of everyone in heaven than anyone in hell--for any length of time.
3. The biblical passages about hell, wrath, destruction, and judgment should be understood quite differently from conventional interpretations. When we see them in their context, they are not proof texts for eternal damnation. They stand unfalteringly for the love of God, especially for the poor and oppressed. They do not contradict the New Testament proclamation of universal salvation in Christ.

Part I

New Testament passages about the salvation of all.

Here are a few of the many verses about universal salvation with my understanding of how they teach the salvation of all. A fuller list of the many passages in the New Testament on “ultimate reconciliation” is at the end of this booklet. (Italics are mine.)

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . . The true light, *which enlightens everyone*, was coming into the world. (John 1:4-5, 9)

The conventional interpretation of this passage is that Jesus was the actual light for only a few people. He only enlightens those people who hear the Gospel in their lifetime. And furthermore, many people reject that enlightenment. Therefore, the darkness in some people actually does overcome the light that Jesus brings. These assumptions make the verse something like this:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of some people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it in some persons. The true light, which enlightens some, was coming into the world.

The astounding claim that Jesus was indeed the light of all people sends a shock wave through us if we take it seriously. In what sense is Jesus the light of *all* people in customary thinking among Christians? Perhaps it means that Jesus has only attempted to be the light of all people but, in fact, he was not. It is true, a few verses later, that John points out that the world did not know him when he came. In case we might think that Jesus only attempted to be the light of all people, John goes on to say that Jesus actually “enlightens everyone (v. 9).”

However, some say that the phrase “which enlightens everyone” simply means he *attempts* to enlighten everyone. Or that Jesus casts a little light on everyone, perhaps through nature, and just enough to make all aware that there is light, but not enough to do any good, that is, to save them. They teach that all have enough light to be saved but choose not to follow that light.

But none of this is compatible with the use of the word “enlighten” in the New Testament. To “enlighten” in the New Testament means “to enlighten spiritually, imbue with a saving knowledge.”¹⁰ This is its meaning in Ephesians 3:9, Hebrews 6:4, and 10:32. This indicates that Jesus enlightens, or brings saving illumination, to everyone, regardless of who they have been, what they have done, what they have believed, or whether they are alive now or dead. If these verses in the first chapter of John are not an absurd exaggeration, and we take them seriously in their most obvious meaning, they make the universal claim that everyone will be spiritually enlightened into the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, not just some. When this process of enlightenment might occur, since it obviously does not happen to everyone in this lifetime, is another subject.

**Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of
the world. (John 1:29)**

Some Bible interpreters say that Jesus only took away the sin of the part of the world that believed in him. All sin wasn't taken away, just some sin. So here is how it appears that they read this verse:

*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of those who believe, but not
the sin of the entire world.*

This changes the meaning considerably. However, in case we might understand it this way, John puts it even more clearly later on:

**And he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for
ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.
(1 John 2:2)**

Some claim that Jesus' taking away sin is not effective unless one accepts that transaction by calling on Jesus to save them. Therefore the Gospel is universal in scope but not universal in effectiveness. This reduces the power of the gospel down to a tiny fragment that does not fit with the theme of universality we see throughout the New Testament. If Jesus takes the sin of the whole world away – then truly all of that sin is GONE!

**For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn
the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:17)**

This statement has been changed in the popular understanding of the Bible to read:

*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save
a small part of the world through him.*

The word “world” may have different meanings in the Bible and the context must determine what it means in a given instance. The meaning here is clear because the world that is not condemned is the same world that gets saved. Jesus is not saying, “I didn’t come to condemn a few people, but I came to save a few people.” The scope of both non-condemnation and salvation is universal.

**For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the
world. (John 12:47)**

Once again, the world that is not judged is the same world that is saved. “World” here means the entire world, not just some class or part of it.

This is a statement from Jesus of his job description: he came to save the world. His goal, his mission, was to save the entire world – every person (as well as animals, things, atoms, molecules, etc.). Therefore, we might ask, “Did Jesus do a good job? If you were going to rate Jesus on his overall job performance, how would you rank him in terms of saving the world?”

Here's how conventional theology has fashioned it: If you take all the people who have ever lived, about 60 billion people since 40,000 B. C.,² and compare that to all the people who have ever heard the Gospel and would claim that they are Christians, about 5 ½ billion,³ you have, at the most, about 10% who are “saved” according to the usual ways of understanding Jesus' saving work.

If Jesus' job is to save 100% of the world, and he ends up saving only 10% of the world, he didn't do very well at his job. Most people would get fired if they only accomplished 10% of their job. According to conventional ideas of heaven and hell, while Jesus' job is to save the world, he ends up saving not even most of the world -- not even half of the world -- but a tiny fraction of the world. Therefore, the traditional interpretation of this passage seems to add a qualifying line that might look something like this:

For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, I will only manage to save a small part of the world.

Is that honestly the ringing truth of this passage? Or, rather, can we say with great confidence and praise, “Thank you, Lord, that you accomplished what you set out to do. You have, indeed, saved the world, the entire world. We cannot fathom or comprehend it. We cannot know how or when it shall be made manifest. But we know you. We know you will never give up until you have accomplished all that you set out to do. You will get the job done. Thanks be to God!”

<p>In Christ God was reconciling the <i>world</i> to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. (2 Cor. 5:19)</p>
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This stunning proclamation has been commonly interpreted to actually mean:

In Christ God was reconciling a small part of the world to himself, not counting a few person's trespasses against them.

When Paul says that God was “not counting their trespasses against them,” he is saying that God has forgiven them. This means that the sins of the world have already been forgiven, and the world is reconciled to God. How and when that may be seen in its completeness remains to be revealed, but for now, we can agree with Paul that it is so!

<p>We know that this man really is the <i>Savior of the world</i>. (John 4:42)</p>

Here are the strong words of the Samaritans about Jesus after he was with them for a couple of days. However, large segments of the Christian world who have known Jesus for a lot

longer than that would never say such a thing. They never make statements such as “Jesus really is the Savior of the world,” even though the New Testament does. Why? Perhaps it is because others might think they actually meant that Jesus is the Savior of the whole world! And that would mean they were universalists!

<p>The Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 1 John 4:14)</p>
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John calls Jesus “the Savior of the world.” Many Christians are accustomed to calling Jesus “my savior,” or “Christians' savior,” but they are not accustomed to calling Jesus the “world’s savior.” That would have to include pagans, atheists, Buddhists, and others who don’t believe the right things. So, many Christians subconsciously read the last verse this way:

The Father has sent his Son as Savior of some of the world.

Some say that Jesus was only “potentially” Savior of the world. But is that what these passages actually say? What did these writers of the New Testament mean by so confidently saying, without qualification, that Jesus was actually the Savior of the world? Let’s pursue this important point further.

Here is a man who has saved a little boy from drowning. This man is the little boy’s savior. It does not mean that he wished he could save him, hoped he could, would like to, or was planning on it. It means that he actually saved him. If the little boy had drowned, you wouldn’t call that man the boy’s savior. You might call him a friend, or someone who tried to help, but you just would not pretend that he had saved him by calling him the boy’s savior.

John calls Jesus the world’s savior. So was Jesus Savior of the world or not? Either Jesus saved the world, or he didn’t. According to John, he did. That means I can say to you that in some sense the world is already saved. It is not all worked out and finished up yet. It is appropriate in biblical thought to say that the world has been saved, is being saved, and shall be saved. The past, present, and future tenses of salvation are all true. You and all of your friends, and everyone who has lived and will ever live is already saved, because Jesus IS the Savior of the world.

Perhaps this is why Pope John Paul II could say, “Every man without exception . . . has been redeemed by Christ . . . because . . . with each man without any exception . . . Christ is in a way united with him, even when that man is unaware of it.”⁴

Many today are unaware that Christ is already their Savior. We can tell them this good news so they can experience a personal relationship with a loving God and the transforming power that brings. All will eventually come into that abiding relationship, but here and now there is so much left to be done to help people know that Jesus has already saved them, and then to see God’s love revolutionize their lives.

It suffices for now to affirm with the New Testament that Jesus is really and truly the Savior of the whole world!

So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2: 10-11)

This is a key passage in any understanding of what the New Testament says about how things are going to end up. The “knees” that are bowing here include every knee, not just some knees. To further emphasize this total inclusiveness, Paul states that these are all the knees from heaven, earth, and under the earth. To the New Testament mind there was no place left for a knee to hide. These are not the few persons remaining after a majority have been annihilated, or those left after all the others have been marched off to a far distant hellish corner of the universe. This is all the people who have ever existed. The simplest and most obvious meaning here is that everyone will be saved because everyone will eventually confess that Jesus is Lord.

The glory of this picture has been shattered by traditional interpretations. Because of their assumptions about an “eternal” hell, many commonly insist this is a picture where the majority of the world’s people are involuntarily bowing and confessing. The terror of hell has finally broken every last sinner down into doing that which they really do not want to do – confess Jesus as Lord. But that change of mind is too late it is claimed. Sinners have supposedly passed the deadline (death), and they are now part of that vast majority of those who are doomed forever. On their way to eternal destruction they stop to tell God that he was right, after all, in a ceremony celebrating God’s final defeat of sinners. Amazingly, the passage then reads something like this:

At the name of Jesus every knee will be forced to bend, and every tongue will be coerced into finally admitting that Jesus is Lord, even though it will be too late to make any difference for most. This is all to the glory of God.

If this sounds absurd or sarcastic, please know that I do not intend it that way. I am extraordinarily serious about this. It is my belief that this is truly how the passage is read with the customary interpretation. It has God as a big bully cracking his whip and making everyone bow before him. These people bowing and confessing aren't really Christians. Rather, they have finally given in to God's superior power and, with God's foot on their necks, they have been pushed down to the ground with their faces in the dirt, wretchedly confessing Jesus is Lord.

There are five significant difficulties with this popular understanding of this passage:

1. The picture of forced confession is not consistent with the biblical use of the word “confess.” The word confess (*exomolein*) is used ten times in the New Testament and implies willing submission in every case. It is especially used in worship and in relationship to this passage it “undoubtedly refers to the worship of the community and confession of Christ made in the Holy Spirit (No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:3). Where members of the community make this confession, they are harbingers of this all-embracing heavenly and cosmic scene.”⁵

2. A second difficulty has to do with a major argument used against ultimate reconciliation that goes like this: Since God has limited himself to humanity's free will, there are those who will forever not choose Christ and confess him as Lord. After all, God will not take away a person's free will. But, strangely, this line of thinking itself counters the usual interpretation of this passage head on. If there are those who are theoretically forever free to resist Christ, then this conventional picture of God forcing a confession out of everyone *is not a picture of free will either*. This interpretation ends up saying God would not force anyone to be saved, but at the same time God will force everyone to confess Jesus is Lord. We cannot have it both ways! If this is a forced confession, then the argument of free will leading some to forever refuse Christ falls apart. The way out of this dilemma is to correctly see this as a picture of an astonishing God who has found a way to irresistibly entice every last person to voluntarily confess Jesus as Lord. These are persons who have freely confessed and are bowing in genuine adoration and worship.

3. A third problem with forced submission is that this flies in the face of God's model of power. Jesus demonstrated that God has chosen the way of the cross, of suffering love, to draw sinners into the web of divine healing. Jesus rejected the way of force and coercion, and, therefore, so does God. Incarnation and the cross both speak of a power that is the opposite of hierarchical and patriarchal domination. Would God suddenly change the divine mind and decide the cross didn't work after all and settle for forced confessions? Surely not!

4. A fourth difficulty with the common understanding of this passage is this: If this is a scene of beaten, coerced persons grudgingly admitting they were wrong, then in what way is that "to the glory of the Father?" Any bully can force someone weaker into submission, but that is seldom glorious. Surely this is not that kind of gloomy picture. Rather, this is the exciting picture of God's self-giving love and sacrificial suffering in Christ that finally wins over the most rebellious, and melts the hearts of the most hardened.

5. Finally, the phrase about confessing "Jesus is Lord" is only used of the saved in the New Testament. Confessing Jesus is Lord is the chief determination as to whether one is a Christian or not. Christians confess Jesus is Lord – all others do not. How can this be a picture of anything other than true Christians? Here, at last, the multitudes upon multitudes of all those who have ever lived have gathered. God's redemptive work has come to a conclusion because the last person has finally embraced the power of suffering love. All have freely and voluntarily made the one great cosmic confession that ushers one into the reign of God. That which Jesus finished on the cross has now been finished in all of creation. The cross was effective. It worked – for all. Jesus has drawn all persons to himself and God's love is triumphant because at the name of Jesus every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus is Lord. Hallelujah!

<p>As all die in Adam, so <i>all</i> will be made alive in Christ. (1 Cor. 15:2 2)</p>
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This reference to Adam is the idea of corporate personality, the concept that one person, the head of the family (always a man in Jewish culture), represented everyone in the family. Adam symbolized the fact that all of us have messed up and the result of that is that we die both physically and spiritually. Paul says that just as this dying applies to everyone, so the coming

alive in Christ applies to everyone. To “be made alive” is never used of those who are not Christians.⁶ Being made alive always has to do with being saved. Paul is simply saying that all, absolutely everyone, will be made alive in Christ.

Traditional theology reads the passage this way:

As all die in Adam, so some will be made alive in Christ.

However, the first “all” clearly refers to “all” persons universally. It is most unlikely that the identical word used in a totally parallel grammatical construction within the very same sentence would have a different meaning. Some translations read “so in Christ shall all be made alive.” To some this implies that only those “in Christ” are the ones made alive. But the grammar of the Greek does not lend itself to this idea as the NRSV translation makes clear. One cannot deny the universal implications of this verse on textual grounds, but only on theological considerations. Paul’s point is simple – all will be made alive in Christ.

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him *all things* in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or ruler or powers--*all things* have been created through him and for him. He himself is before *all things* and in him *all things* hold together. . . . For in him *all the fullness of God* was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things, whether on earth or in heaven.* (Colossians 1:15-20)

This is a most incredible passage-- astonishing in orbit, sweeping in claim, universal in application, and all-embracing in scope. The word “all” is used seven times in a row here. This small but powerful word will not go away. Occasionally in narrative accounts in the New Testament the word “all” is used in a loose sense as in Luke 2:1: “A decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” Because of the context we understand this refers to the world known locally to be ruled by the emperor, not the entire world beyond the borders of Roman influence.

But in this strongly theological passage in Colossians, the word “all” is clearly defined by the context itself. It must mean literally “all,” unless we assume Christ is the first born of only part, not all, of creation. And that he did not create all things, but only some things. Or that all the fullness of God did not dwell in him, only some of God. Clearly the word “all” here is not used in a loose way but in its most universal sense.

This is one of the most extraordinary “all” passages in the New Testament. It blows my mind! Paul uses seven “all’s” to shout the glorious universality of Christ. This passage is so full of awesome truths that I can hardly read it without feeling a sense of praise to God rise up within me.

Christ is called the “firstborn,” the one who takes precedent in the Jewish family system. Christ is the first of all creation. It means there is nothing in creation that’s ahead of him.

He created everything and everything was created for him. That’s so big an idea it is

difficult for us to grasp. But we can grasp the fact that “all” means absolutely “all” here. There's nothing that exists that the Christ didn't create. It may be fallen and sinful, but it was originally created in splendor by Christ.

The first six “all’s” in this passage clearly mean everything. They mean all and nothing but all. Not part, some, half, or even most, but all. Now we come to the most glorious and final “all.”

**Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself
all things, whether on earth or in heaven. (Col. 1:20)**

If Paul, a very careful writer, believed that only part of creation was reconciled to God, this would be the perfect moment to say so. He could have written something like:

Though he is before all things, through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself some things.

But he did not write that. He wrote “all things.” Either Paul’s claim is a ludicrous exaggeration--or it is true. Through the power of the Spirit’s inspiration, in an unqualified and wondrous statement, Paul reveals the ultimate truth of creation– all things have been reconciled in Christ!

If the first six “all’s” mean absolutely all, then this last must mean “all” in exactly the same sense. What could be a clearer statement of universal salvation in Christ? When I come across those who say that this can’t include everyone because we know from other passages that not everyone will be saved, I ask, “What part of ‘all’ don’t you understand?”

Notice the *past tense* of the statement, “God was pleased to reconcile all things.” It is not, “God *will be* pleased to reconcile all things.” No, it is God has **already** reconciled all things in Christ! They are reconciled right now! We are all one with God and with one another right now! This is not often a part of our consciousness now, but it is what God is working towards within us.

I believe the “kingdom of heaven,” which formed the theme of Jesus’ teaching, is the conscious awareness that we are one with God and all others. This is the awareness of heaven. From this consciousness flows the love and justice that the world so much needs. This is the awareness with which Jesus operated. It explains why he did what he did and also the power with which he did it. If we become aware that we are already one with God and all things, then we, too, can and will act as Jesus did. And we, too, can and will do the things Jesus did because of the power of that oneness made manifest. In this light, I understand that, most accurately, God’s goal is not to get us into heaven but to get heaven into us!

The love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, will eventually make this reconciliation manifest by healing and drawing every last person and every part of creation into the realization of their complete oneness with God. This is our destiny.

**And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw
all people to myself. (John 12:32)**

Jesus himself proclaims the universal effectiveness of salvation through his own person by stating in unequivocal terms, from his own lips, that he will draw all people to himself. Jesus, in a clear reference to his being lifted up on the cross, was, in fact, lifted up, dying for us all. Therefore, he will, in fact, draw all people to himself. However, many have been taught to unconsciously read the passage this way:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will not draw all people to myself, but only those who are believers.

It seems to me that the common reading of this verse loses a little something! It might be fair to say this is a dangerous reading that makes the passage say exactly the opposite of its intended meaning. Again, I must ask those with conventional interpretations: “What part of ‘all’ is it that you don’t understand?”

Let’s look more closely at the phrase “will draw.” This is the same term used in, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me and I will raise that person up on the last day (John 6:44).” The word “draw” in every instance in the New Testament portrays a power that overcomes the resistance offered. This verse does not in any way imply that Jesus is offering potential, or possible, salvation to all. Rather, he is saying that what he offers effectively overcomes all barriers. On the cross, with outstretched arms, Jesus draws all people, every last person, into his loving, healing, saving care.

**For the grace of God has appeared,
bringing salvation to all. (Titus 2:11)**

This verse has popularly been weakened to be read:

For the grace of God has appeared, offering potential salvation to all, but bringing actual salvation only to some.

Some teachers attempt to make this mean only “offering” and not actually bringing salvation. Or making it “potential” salvation rather than real salvation. Such contrivances are based on a theological idea and not a linguistic one. When your theological assumptions say that all will not be saved, then you must do something to change those texts that state otherwise. This is an exceptionally clear passage revealing that God’s salvation has effectively been brought to everyone without exception.

He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

The expression “all things” is an almost technical equivalent to the totality of creation. The NEB renders it “the universe.” The phrase “all things” is the greatest possible inclusionary statement that can be made in New Testament language. It leaves out nothing. It includes everyone and everything.⁷

Those who specialize in the meaning of Greek words say this about this “all things”: “(All things) denotes the totality of cosmic beings endowed with will and capable of decision, not men alone, hence the neuter plural.”⁸ “(All things) is formally used for all creatures, the universe.”⁹

“Since most men do not confess this principal power of Christ, mission is needed to actualize it in detail. . . . All flesh is to see salvation (Luke 3:6). The house of Israel will (Acts 2:36), but then the whole world or all creation (Mark 16:15, Colossians 1:6, 23) . . . But this means that all things will be made new, Revelation 21:5 . . . All New Testament proclamation is full of abounding joy at the universality of Christ.”¹⁰

Can there be any clearer statement of what will absolutely be done in the “fullness of time”? Whether we call it ultimate reconciliation, all will be saved, or universal salvation in Christ, it means just what this passage claims – all will be brought into Christ. Hell will be empty. No one will be left behind.

Then I heard *every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them*, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! (Revelation 5:13)

Even in the midst of vivid images of vengeance and death in Revelation, there are glimpses of universal salvation. Here John gets an early glimpse of Revelation’s final scene of paradise pictured in Revelation 22. All persons, and yes, even “creatures,” join in a grand chorus of praise.

One commentator says (*Italics his*):

“The redemption of *men from every tribe, tongue, people, and race* is far from being the whole story of Christ’s work of atonement as John understands it. For he hears the choirs of heaven joined by the voices of the *whole creation* in a final outburst of praise. This should not be dismissed as mere hyperbole. John knows only too well that there is much *on earth and under the earth and in the sea which has no inclination* to join in the worship of Christ, and that these hostile elements are represented even *in heaven*. But such is his confidence in the universality of Christ’s achievement that his vision cannot stop short of universal response. He agrees with Paul that God has already in the Cross reconciled the whole universe to himself (Col. 1:20), and that to make his act of amnesty and reconciliation known to the world is the royal and priestly task of the church, the success of which is already anticipated in the heavenly picture of all creation gathered to praise God.”¹¹

Part II

JESUS ON HELL

When it comes to the subject of hell, Jesus was the expert. This is because hell (Gehenna) is mentioned exactly twelve times in the Bible and eleven of those times, it comes from the lips of Jesus. The Old Testament never uses the word hell, nor does it have much of a concept of an afterlife of any kind. The closest it comes is the word *Sheol*, which is a place deep under the earth's surface where the dead, both righteous and unrighteous alike, abide. There is neither punishment nor reward there.¹²

Mark, probably the first canonical gospel to be written, contains Jesus' first reference to hell:

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off: it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where the worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.
(Mark 9:47-48)

The word Jesus used which is translated as "hell" is the word "Gehenna" and is the name for the Valley of Hinnon located just south of Jerusalem. Gehenna had an ugly history. Two of Israel's most evil kings offered their sons to the god, Moloch, there. Other victims were sacrificed there also. It was the most detestable place in all of Israel.

For hundreds of years it was the town garbage dump and that's what it was in Jesus' day. The fires were kept going there to consume the garbage and literally the worms didn't die and the fires kept going for centuries in that valley. Dennis and Sheila Linn, two amazing writers of a number of helpful books, say that we know today this is an especially good image for what happens to us when we act in unloving ways. We not only feel like garbage, but scientists tell us that we start to physically deteriorate just like the garbage in Gehenna.¹³

Dennis and Sheila also spent some time in hell a few years ago. (The second picture on the front of this booklet is an actual picture today of the Gehenna, hell, of which Jesus spoke.) They were visiting Jerusalem during Holy Week. On Holy Saturday, when tradition says that Jesus went to visit hell in between the crucifixion and the resurrection, they decided to visit Gehenna. Here is the way they described their visit:

"The only other person in hell that Saturday was a shepherd caring for his herd of goats. Trying not to disturb him, we sat down at the far side of hell and began our Holy Saturday vigil. A short while later, another man dressed as a shepherd entered the valley and greeted us. He walked through hell for about a quarter of a mile. Then he suddenly turned around and walked quickly back to us. He told us he had spotted some Arab children

whom he was afraid would come and stone us. He insisted on walking us to the other end of the valley where we would be safe. For twenty minutes this shepherd and his staff guided us safely through hell, making sure that no one harmed us. We thanked him and sat down, now at the most extreme edge of hell, to resume our Holy Saturday vigil. About an hour later, as we turned to leave we noticed him sitting high up on the wall of Jerusalem's old city that overlooked the valley. He had posted himself there as our sentry, still guarding us to be sure that nothing would happen to us in hell. When we had finally exited hell, we waved to our shepherd who then climbed down from his sentry post and disappeared into the old city.”¹⁴

What an incredible picture of Jesus, our good shepherd, who walks with us through all of our hells!

When Jesus warned people about ending up in hell, was he saying that some people would end up literally in this garbage dump? Of course not. Those listening to him would have understood exactly what he was talking about. Jesus was using a dramatic figure of speech to make a very real point about life, not describing a literal destination after death.

However, in the fourth century, Augustine and others turned hell into an actual, physical place and contended that the fire and worms of hell torture the damned physically and that the ability of bodies not to disintegrate but to withstand this punishment forever is a “miracle of the most omnipotent Creator.”

The well-known Protestant preacher of the last century, Jonathan Edwards, gave a famous sermon called, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” In order to scare people into heaven, Edwards painted a vivid picture of God dangling sinners over the flames of hell. He says:

“That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is Hell’s wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and Hell but the air; ‘tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.”¹⁵

Is this what Jesus meant when he warned that it was better to enter the reign of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell? What is the point of Jesus’ warning about hell? Some have said that it is one of many references to the fate of unforgiven sinners – thrown into a hell where the fires never end. Others have said that it is a warning that if we don’t keep God’s commandments, in the eye case, probably about lust, we will spend eternity in everlasting punishment. If this is really true – we’re all goners!

When I teach about this passage, I call my listeners' attention to the fact that there are two parts to it. Then I ask, “How many of you believe we should take the first part literally, where it says that if your eye gets you into trouble, tear it out?” No one ever raises their hand. I then remind them that there have been occasions down through church history, when someone mentally disturbed or, in the history of passionate sainthood, has literally cut off a hand or torn

out their eyes in an effort to take this passage literally. One early Christian leader castrated himself on this basis. But, in general, we don't have support groups for the religiously maimed because most people think it is obvious that Jesus was speaking metaphorically, not literally.

Jesus was using a figure of speech to make a point. However, because of how people have dealt with the second part of this passage, we do need support groups for the religiously abused!

This becomes clear when I next ask the group, "How many of you have been taught that we should take the second part literally - that there's a real place called hell where the torture and flames, real or spiritual, last forever?" Most raise their hands. Then I ask, "Why haven't we been taught that this second part might be a metaphor also?" Why was Jesus not again using a figure of speech to make a point? This gives great pause to many who have uncritically accepted the conventional understanding of this passage.

In interpreting the Bible we know that "a text without a context is a pretext." Let's look at the context of this text so we don't end up with the pretext of an eternal hell and miss the real lesson.

Jesus begins this discussion in Matthew with the call to be childlike and the importance of children. He says, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," and, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me (Matthew 18:3, 5)." The context is powerless little children.

Next Jesus says, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matt. 18:6)." And in Mark he says If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones . . . (9:2) Again, the subject is harming vulnerable little children.

Immediately after our passage in Mathew about cutting off your hand rather than sin is a second reminder, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones (Matthew 18:10)."

Jesus says that it is better to go through life maimed than to offend a powerless one. This is because the person who offends one of these little ones will be cast into the notorious garbage dump called Gehenna. Then Jesus follows with the story of a shepherd going out to look for the one lost sheep who has strayed from the flock. He refers to the lost sheep as representing one of the little ones.

One of the most vulnerable groups in Jesus' day was children. Jesus was, of course, saying that we are not to mistreat children. But children here also represent *all of those who are powerless and vulnerable*. God is especially concerned about how those with more power treat those with less power.

The context of this teaching by Jesus is the oppression of the powerless by the powerful.

We have a choice to either take this passage literally, or to take it seriously. You cannot do both. If we take this passage literally, then it is about mutilating our bodies and being thrown into a garbage dump. That doesn't make sense. Nor does it make sense to think this passage is a

description of an eternal hell after death that awaits those who do not believe in Jesus. It says nothing about Jesus. Those who believe that confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior brings entry into heaven are faced with a dilemma. This passage, taken literally, indicates that it is our good behavior that keeps us from hell. But many Christians hold that only faith in Jesus can keep us from hell. Surely such a Christian could not take this passage literally. So if this is not about eternal hell and heaven after death, and how we get there, then what is it about?

The point of this passage is that God loves the oppressed so much that God demands that we stop oppressing them!
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Jesus graphically points out that those who oppress others damage not only those others, but themselves as well. In his “shock it to them” kind of hyperbole, Jesus demands that anything which oppresses the helpless is to be avoided at all costs.

Those who would tame this passage down to the distorted idea of unbelievers going to hell and Christians going to heaven totally miss the point. This is not about escaping an everlasting hell after one dies. This is a challenge to act with justice and love in the here and now.

This teaching expresses the “garbage dump existence” of mistreating the vulnerable, but says nothing about how long that existence might last. The picture of “Hell” on the cover says certainly not forever!

The traditional understanding of this passage has distorted the message of compassion and justice towards the vulnerable, the outcast, and the powerless into a spiritually abusive lie about the supposed fate of those who are not Christians.

We have changed Jesus’ eternal words about oppression into oppressive words about eternity!

The Judgment of the Nations

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”

Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care for you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

(Matthew 25:31-46)

Is this about eternity in heaven or hell?

We have become quite accustomed to thinking that this is Jesus' picture of the final outcome of all history in which there are two possible ultimate destinies for every person – eternal punishment or eternal life. This is what the popular writer, Richard Foster, concludes in commenting on this passage as he writes against the idea of universal salvation in Christ: “We

cannot argue over whether or not [in this Matthew 25 passage] Jesus is intending to teach us that there are two final possibilities for human existence. He did not leave that matter open for debate.”¹⁶

But is this really the case? It may seem so since this is the only place in the New Testament where the two words “eternal punishment” are used together, and they come from the lips of Jesus. Here it is in Jesus’ own words. How can we argue with that? I will argue very strongly against that very interpretation.

Does being good save us?

First, turning this into a story about life after death in either heaven or hell presents an absolutely insurmountable problem for those Christians who believe that we are saved by trusting Christ and not by our good works. Evangelicals and others do not usually believe that good works get a person into heaven or that sin gets a person into hell.

However, if we take this story literally, it is clear that believing in Jesus is not the basis for heaven or hell – it is whether one was good or bad. This story seems to be saying that if you’re bad, you go to eternal punishment (hell). If you’re good, you go to eternal life (heaven).

But notice that there is not even one reference in the entire story to Jesus! Taken literally, in this teaching, Jesus has nothing to do with whether you go to eternal life or eternal punishment!

So here is the question that must be answered by those evangelicals and others who believe salvation is by faith in Christ alone but would take this story literally when it comes to heaven and hell: On what basis does a reader of the Bible reject taking one part of this passage literally (the basis of works and not Christ for getting us to heaven or hell) and yet insist the other part (we will go to eternal punishment or into eternal life as an ultimate destiny) is to be taken literally?

Richard Foster uses this story to show that Jesus himself insisted that all were going either to heaven or to hell. But Foster would be the first to insist that our destiny in heaven or hell is entirely a matter of whether we have placed our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Teachers, like Richard Foster, cannot have it both ways. How can they accept the supposed penalty (eternal hell) but reject the basis of the penalty (good works), both from the same passage?

A punishing God?

Another serious difficulty with taking this story literally is that it pictures a punishing God who is the complete opposite of the God that Jesus pictured twenty chapters earlier. The picture of vindictive punishment is somewhat softened here by the use of the word *kolasis* for punishment.¹⁷ It originally meant the pruning of trees to make them grow better. In all of Greek literature *kolasis* is never used of anything but remedial punishment. It is also moderated by an understanding of the word “eternal” as having to do with quality rather than quantity.

However, this passage is most often interpreted as retributive punishment of the wicked, falling under the thin rubric of God's "justice." Many Christians seem to understand divine justice as giving out punishment to wrongdoers. However, throughout the Bible in both Old and New Testaments, *divine justice is that God is always on the side of the outcast and powerless.* That's God's brand of justice!

Jesus says that God loves God's enemies and is kind to the wicked (Luke 6:35). Which is it? *Does God get revenge, or does God give grace?*

This story is Jesus' radical commentary on justice for the needy in the world here and now, not predictions about the future for those who are not Christians!

Jesus is using dramatic figures of speech called "apocalyptic imagery" to make his point. Apocalyptic imagery has to do with graphic portrayals of the future of the world such as we see in Daniel and Revelation. However, Jesus uses that shocking imagery to make a startling point, not about the world's future, but about the world *here and now*.

Of whom was Jesus speaking in this story? Was he addressing each and every person and painting a picture of their ultimate destiny in heaven or hell on the basis of how they treated others? It is interesting to look at how Jesus' disciples treated him in relationship to this passage. Shortly after this teaching, the men closest to Jesus, to the last man, treated him as a stranger, denying they ever knew him, and left him in prison - beaten, sick, naked, and hungry. And Jesus wasn't even appearing as a stranger! Did Jesus consign them to eternal punishment because they had just done what he had warned them against? No! Jesus' response to their actions was, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do (John 23:34)." And later, he assured them that he would never, ever, leave them (Matt. 28:20).

If Jesus was not speaking about individuals, of whom was he speaking? The key word for the context is the word "nations;" that is, people together in their communities ("All the nations will be gathered before him . . . v. 32."). Here is the clue which helps us understand just what Jesus intended.

This is Jesus' far-reaching judgment on the political, social, and religious world of his day. He is saying that what makes a nation, a class, a church, or any community great is compassion for those who are in need.

This parable is Jesus' commentary on us today, too. Jesus is saying that hell (garbage dump existence) is not for unbelievers; it is for oppressors! We must not trivialize this powerful teaching about justice love into the details of life after death, even though it does contain a strong warning that there are consequences, surely both now and later, for those who oppress the marginalized.

Using Jesus' imagery (and borrowing from Tony Campolo), imagine our country being questioned at judgment day. "Did you feed the hungry?" God asks. "No, but we balanced the budget." "Did you clothe the naked?" "No, but we cut taxes." "Did you visit the prisoners?"

“No, but we built more prisons and executed more prisoners.” “Did you change the structures of society so there aren't as many victims?” “No, but we protected our oil supplies by bombing other countries.”

Imagine our churches being questioned at judgment day. “Did you care for the stranger?” “No, but we raised a million dollar budget.” “Did you welcome the oppressed?” “No, but we had a reputation as a successful church that never had any serious conflicts.”

Jesus is saying that the churches that “go to heaven” are those who welcome the outcast. The churches that “go to hell” (live in the garbage dump) are the ones who gather themselves up and say that it is just too difficult to welcome the outcast - we'll lose members!

Jesus is using dramatic imagery, not that we would believe in an eternal hell, but that we would believe in the call to battle against the very real hell of oppression here and now.

However, there is judgment for those who oppress. Garbage dump existence, now, or later, is not nice. What we sow we shall reap. Belief in the ultimate reconciliation of all things does not preclude judgment and time spent in learning the ways of love, even if it is by way of the garbage dump existence Jesus called Gehenna.

Hell is for the unloving, not the unbelieving

What about the burning with fire and sulfur hell?

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murders, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death (Rev. 21:8).

What happens if we take this passage literally, as it stands?

The cowardly? How many of us have ever been afraid and acted cowardly? How often have we not been true to ourselves and what we believe? How often have we been silent instead of speaking out for a righteous cause? The truth is that we're all a bunch of cowards!

The faithless? How many of us have ever been faithless, that is, not as faithful as you should have been? How many times have we given up, rather than stayed with the divine purposes in life? How often have we strayed from the path that God has set before us? The truth is, we're all a faithless bunch!

Liars? How many of us have ever told a lie? How many times have we said something that was not entirely accurate, an exaggeration, or something less than the whole truth? How many lies, shadings of the truth, or silence about the truth does it take to make us liars? We're all a bunch of liars!

Let's look at our fate as cowardly, faithless liars according to Revelation 21:8. Why, we are all condemned to the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death! Right about this time, most of us have probably decided not to take this verse literally. So then, what is it about?

It is about Christians who were in the middle of a terrible persecution. We have nothing to compare it with in our country today, although other lands do. These early Christians were being slaughtered everywhere. They were tossed to the lions by Nero. They were being asked to recant and call Caesar Lord, not Jesus. This was a call to hold the faith. This was a bold proclamation that the enemy will be defeated, using the fiery language of apocalyptic code.

Those who believe salvation is by faith alone and not by works have a very serious problem with taking this passage literally. This passage says that it is wrong actions that send this crowd to hell, not rejecting Jesus Christ.

The most profound problem, if we decide to take this passage in some literal sense, is that Jesus said we should love our enemies, not burn them with sulfur. We may need to protect ourselves against them and stand tough, but nothing like the picture here.

Apocalyptic imagination is filled with violence. That kind of imagination dwells in darkness and not light. The cross was God's final answer to violence. In Christ, God has chosen the cross, so the dark violence and vengeance of Revelation cannot to be taken as the true light of God shining down upon the world.

This strikes at the very heart of who Jesus is and what he came to do. Paul says that Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). We must decide if Jesus is the image of God to which all other images must be compared. Or are there other pictures of God which compete with the picture of God Jesus has given us? Is Jesus the standard or are their other standards that conflict with the revelation of Jesus? This is the critical question facing those who would take the Bible in some literal way that makes the Bible Lord in the same way that Jesus is supposed to be Lord.

We must take both the Bible and Jesus seriously. But we must decide which comes first. Is Jesus Lord or is the Bible Lord? It cannot be both, for Jesus shares his Lordship with nothing else.
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When there are sometimes conflicting pictures of God presented throughout the Bible, we must decide if Jesus is the standard by which all of the Bible must be interpreted, or not. I choose Jesus!

Therefore, understanding this passage in its historical, cultural, and theological context, we see that today we cannot take this passage in any literal sense, both because we would all end up in hell, sent there by our cowardly, faithless, lying actions, and because it is inconsistent with the picture Jesus has given us of a loving God.

So that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16b)
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We have been taught that "perish" means "going to unending hell." But Jesus did not say or mean that. To believe in Jesus is to have "eternal (*aionios*) life," the *transcendent life* of the age to come which invades this age now in Jesus. We must not think of "eternal life" as "unending life" because Jesus defined it differently: "This is eternal life, to know the only true

God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3).”

We “perish” if we do not “believe” in Jesus. While this perishing is not an unending condition, it is real nevertheless. What does it mean to “believe” in Jesus and, therefore, not perish?

John says, “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7). *Without living in God’s love we perish.* Without embracing love, we die. Without love we are condemned. *If Jesus is God’s Love Incarnate, Love Personified, then to reject Jesus is to reject pure Love. To embrace Jesus is to embrace pure Love.* By “reject Jesus” I mean to reject the real Jesus, not the false, vengeful one so often portrayed by the church. We should reject that one! Real lovers never reject the real Jesus!

Nothing in this passage, or any other in the Bible, indicates that “perishing” or what I call “hell for a spell” is eternal. From the many other passages, we know that absolutely everyone will ultimately come into the saving embrace of that divine Love.

In Conclusion

Why the Bible teaches us that all will come to Christ

The idea of a God who would send us, or allow us to go, to a hell of everlasting torment is based on the images of God associated with the laws, penalties, and rituals of the Old Testament.

The picture of God presented in the Old Testament is of a God who is both loving and faithful and, also, vengeful and violent. There are six hundred instances and stories of divinely sanctioned violence, including Noah and the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Exodus. There are over one hundred Psalms which are war songs about enemies, hate and destruction in the name of God, presenting a deity who murders, kills, and acts with pathological violence.

How does one understand the Bible in the light of these stunningly different images of God? The key to interpreting the Bible is to know that the Jesus of the Bible is the criteria by which the rest of the Bible must be understood.

Jesus, the “image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15)” and “the exact imprint of God’s very being (Heb. 1:3),” presented a radically different picture of God. For Jesus, God was not a stern lawgiver, vengeful judge, and violent executioner. God was a compassionate lover whom he called by the same name he called his father Joseph, Abba.

In the Law of Moses, God commanded, and limited, retaliation to an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Jesus rejected that law and replaced it with “Love your enemies! (Matt. 5:44).”

Furthermore, Jesus claimed that we are to love our enemies because this is what God does. People, wrongly, believed that the God of the Old Testament punished enemies. The God of Jesus rejected violence and punishment of any kind. Instead, God practices what Jesus

preached. God loves enemies, and “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked (Luke 6:35).” God, our Eternal Lover, goes after the lost son, the lost coin, and the lost sheep. Jesus’ death on the cross was the ultimate picture of the God who rejected the earlier portrayals of violence and vengeance.

John proclaimed that “the law was indeed given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:16).” Therefore, the early church abolished the laws, penalties, and rituals of the Old Testament because they saw them incompatible with Jesus (Acts 15). Paul declared that “Christ is the end of the law Rom. 14:1).”

But what we have not understood is that Christ is not only the end of the law but also the end of the images of God that were associated with the law given through Moses. Paul says that “all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse (Gal. 3:10).” It is equally true that all who rely upon the images of God that came with the law are also under a curse!

The logical, natural, and Spirit-led conclusion of loving your enemies was that the writers of the New Testament proclaimed that God would eventually reconcile everyone through Jesus Christ, including those who were once God’s enemies. Numerous neglected and discounted passages (see end of this booklet for a listing of thirty-four in the New Testament proclaim this universal salvation in Christ.

The Gospel of John announces that Jesus is “the true light which enlightens everyone (John 1:9).” Paul declares that, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).” John says, “The Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14).” Paul writes that, “As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ (1 Cor. 15:22).” And then shouts, “Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven (Col. 1:20)!”

Contemporary interpretations of these many passages attempt to deny their plain and clear meaning with torturous explanations of how they really don’t mean what they say, in order to fit them into the belief in an everlasting hell. Conventional theology has even done this with Jesus’ teaching about hell.

Jesus, the expert of hell, never, not once, connected hell with whether one is a Christian or not. Jesus said that the “garbage dump existence” that he called hell was not for unbelievers, but for oppressors! Jesus connected hell with the powerful oppressing the powerless, not with believing in him or doctrines of any kind.

The few passages in the rest of the New Testament which, in popular interpretation, seem to indicate that humankind has two ultimate destinies, heaven and hell, can be, and should be understood differently.

One reason for misunderstanding some of them is that the translation of the word *aionios* as “eternal” is misleading. *Aionian* does not indicate quantity of time, such as “unending,” as much as it denotes quality of time, such as “that which belongs to the coming ages” or “transcendent.” There is nothing in the hell, destruction, judgment and wrath passages that would lead us to believe that they are speaking of any condition that is unending.

There is no passage – not even one – in the New Testament, when understood in its historical, cultural, and theological context that teaches that hell, judgment, destruction or wrath will last forever.

The conventional understanding of everlasting hell, the penalty for rejecting or not knowing Jesus Christ in this brief lifetime, is a punishment that doesn't fit the crime. That kind of punishment does not even meet the Old Testament standard of the law that required only equal retaliation, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The idea of an eternity of torment for a brief lifetime of any kind of sin does not fit with the image of God that Jesus revealed.

Instead, Jesus proclaimed that, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:32).” Paul echoes that glorious declaration, saying, “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven (Col.1:20).”

Thus, in Christ, the universal restoration (Acts 3:21) of every last person is a certainty, and God, having “mercy on them all (Rom 11:32),” will finally be “all in all (1Cor. 15:28).”

Hallelujah!

This I Passionately Believe

In the incredibly strong language of Matthew 23, Jesus condemned the venomous (“you brood of vipers”) teaching of the religious leaders of his own religion that actually kept people from God in the name of God. With that striking model in mind, here is what I feel and think about the conventional idea of hell, in the strongest vocabulary I can think of.

The worst kind of lie is one told in the name of God. And the worst lie ever told in the name of God by religious leaders today and throughout history is that there is an unending hell where people are punished eternally for their sins.

The manipulative idea of an everlasting hell arose from the ego-driven desire of religious leaders and institutions to control people’s behavior and beliefs with threats of divine rejection, violence and unending punishment.

All the religious rhetoric about a loving God that wants us to love our enemies is ultimately sabotaged and revealed to be schizophrenic foolishness if somewhere in that belief system is the utterly false belief that God will allow anyone to be punished for eternity in an endless hell of torment. And certainly not if it includes the immoral, ungodly belief that the vast majority of the human race will be tormented forever!

The regressive belief in an eternal hell is the single most destructive mind and heart barrier to taking the life and teaching of Jesus seriously.

How can you trust a bipolar God who loves you one moment and the next is quite willing to punish you with hell for eternity for something you did or didn’t do in this brief lifetime for something you did or didn’t do in this brief lifetime, under the rubric of justice?

Believing in eternal hell plays to our worst fears. Authentic spiritual growth is motivated by the power of grace and unconditional acceptance and not by fear of God’s supposed wrath.

The one single religious doctrine that has caused more suffering, agony, wars, and violence than any other idea invented by human beings is the sadistic notion of eternal hell. This venomous and spiritually abusive belief is utterly opposed to Jesus’ teaching and living demonstration that God is love and will ceaselessly draw all people, without exception, into the awakened, saving, redeeming experience of divine compassion.

Author’s Note

I have written this case for universal salvation for Christians at almost any place on the theological spectrum. I have purposefully kept the biblical message of universal salvation clear and simple. Therefore, while aware of various theological positions, I have left undefined any further examination of such things as biblical interpretation, atonement, and the meaning of “in Christ.” I believe that however one understands terms such as those, my case for God leaving no one behind still holds.

New Testament passages on the salvation of all through Christ

(From NRSV, Italics mine)

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of *all* people. The light shines in *the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*. . . . (John 1:4-5).

The true light, which enlightens *everyone*, was coming into the world (John 1: 9).

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin *of the world* (John 1:29).

And he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but *also for the sins of the whole world* (1 John 2:2).

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to *save the world* through him (John 3:17).

For I did not come to judge the world, but to *save the world* (John 12:47).

In Christ God was reconciling *the world* to himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Corinthians 5:19).

We know that this man really is the *Savior of the world* (John 4:42).

May they also be in us so that *the world* may believe that you have sent me (John 17:21).

The Father has sent his Son as the *Savior of the world* (1 John 4:14).

So that at the name of Jesus *every* knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and *every* tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2: 10-11).

For we will *all* stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, *every* knee shall bow to me, and *every* tongue shall give praise to God (Romans 14: 10-11).”

As *all* die in Adam, so *all* will be made alive in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:2 2).

But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. . . . The last enemy to be destroyed is death . . . so that God may *be all in all* (1 Corinthians 15:23-28).

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of *all* creation. For in him *all* things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or ruler or powers--*all* things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him *all* things hold together. . . . For in him *all* the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him *God was pleased to reconcile to himself all* things, whether on earth or in heaven (Colossians 1:15-20).

. . . that we might be a kind of first fruit of *all* he created (James 1:18).

But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of *all* things (Hebrews 1:2).

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* people to myself (John 12:32).

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but *all* to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:3).

. . . Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of *universal restoration* that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. . . You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, “And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Acts. 3:21, 25).

For there is one God: there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for *all* (1 Timothy 2: 5-6).

For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of *all* people, especially of those who believe (1 Timothy 4:10).

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to *all* (Titus 2:11).

But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for *everyone* (Hebrews 2:9).

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for *all*: therefore *all* have died. And he died for *all*, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15).

Therefore, just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for *all*, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for *all*. For just as by one man’s disobedience the *many* were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the *many* will be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19).

I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the *full number* of the Gentiles has come in. And so *all* Israel will be saved . . . for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11: 25, 29).

For God has bound *all* over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them *all* (Romans 11:32).

He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up *all* things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:9-10).

He (Jesus) 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 who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built . . . For this reason *the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead*, so that they might be judged according to persons in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit (1 Peter 3:18-20, 4:4).

Then I heard *every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them*, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! (Revelation 5:13).

See, I am making *all* things new (Revelation 21:5).

ENDNOTES

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Paul Smith has been a teacher and pastor at Broadway Church in Kansas City, MO since 1963. Copies of this book may be ordered at www.broadwaychurch-kc.org.

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