

Jesus and the Other Place

What the Bible
really says about Hell
and the difference this makes
to our evangelism and pastoral care

Paul Hazelden

with a foreword by Roger Forster

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About this book

This book seeks to take seriously what Jesus tells us about the fate of those who do not follow Him. The message Jesus gives us about the next world can be found throughout the Bible, and can be summarised very simply: we are offered two paths, we can choose between two possible futures; we can receive eternal life, or we can perish.

Traditional mainstream Christian teaching threatens the unsaved with eternal torment. This is not based on the Bible's teaching; it distorts the Gospel message, disrupts our evangelism, and makes honest and sensitive pastoral care for the bereaved even harder than it is already. It presents our Heavenly Father as a cruel monster.

About the author

Paul lives in Bristol. He is married, with three grown-up sons; he has a varied background, including working on a building site and in a bookshop, a career in IT, the leadership of several churches and building a charity working with vulnerable people. He has authored numerous articles and has a MTh in Applied Theology.

Paul has worked within and alongside churches and Christian organisations from a wide range of denominations and theological traditions. He has extensive experience of talking about matters of faith with people, whether they are outside the Church or within it. In recent years, many of these conversations happened while working with alcoholics and drug addicts, their friends and families: people who know they or someone they love has a high risk of dying, people who frequently know someone who has recently died and who need to talk about it.

Paul suspects that good Christian theology is essentially pastoral in nature: God tells us what He knows we need to know and understand; and all good pastoral care is essentially theological in nature: only the truth is strong enough to build a life upon.

Many conversations and Bible studies over a period of around 30 years have produced the notes which grew into this present work. Paul has tested the basic content with people ranging from pastors and theologians through to the completely unchurched, holding a wide variety of positions, over a period of around 30 years. This, of course, does not guarantee that it is right, but it does give Paul some confidence that the material is worth considering, interesting, and potentially life-changing.

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	1
<i>Preface</i>	3

Part One: The Key Issues

1. <i>Introduction</i>	11
1.a. The traditional doctrine.....	11
1.b. Alternatives to torment.....	16
1.c. A gentle start.....	18
1.d. Destruction, not torment.....	19
1.e. The unspoken threat?.....	20
1.f. Greek and Hebrew souls.....	22
1.g. Eternal life.....	25
1.h. The meaning of ‘eternal’.....	27
2. <i>The Short Version</i>	31
2.a. God so loved the world.....	31
2.b. The wages of sin.....	33
2.c. The reality of Hell.....	34
2.d. Sodom and Gomorrah.....	35
2.e. Weeping and gnashing of teeth.....	37
2.f. Taking stock.....	38

Part Two: The Gory Details

3. <i>Old Testament Evidence for Destruction</i>	43
3.a. In the beginning.....	43
3.b. After the fall.....	44
3.c. Blown away like chaff.....	45
3.d. Consumed like stubble.....	46
3.e. Their final destiny.....	46
3.f. Like the idols.....	47
3.g. Death and destruction.....	47
3.h. And others in the Old Testament.....	48
3.i. What the Old Testament doesn’t say.....	49
4. <i>NT Evidence for Destruction by Fire</i>	51
4.a. Burning in the New Testament.....	51
4.b. Examples of burning.....	52
4.c. Believers and fire.....	53
4.d. Fire and justice.....	54
4.e. The Day of the Lord.....	56
4.f. Passing through fire.....	57
5. <i>Other NT Evidence for Destruction</i>	59
5.a. Broad is the way.....	59
5.b. Great was the fall.....	59
5.c. Soul and body in Hell.....	60

5.d. Those who are thrown out.....	60
5.e. Sowing to the flesh.....	60
5.f. Righteous judgement.....	61
5.g. Those who refuse to follow Jesus.....	62
5.h. Those who oppose Jesus.....	62
5.i. No more tears.....	63
5.j. Rejecting the Creator.....	65
6. <i>The Weaker Evidence for Eternal Torment</i>	67
6.a. The sheep and the goats.....	68
6.b. If your eye causes you to sin.....	69
6.c. Causing to sin.....	69
6.d. Fire and darkness.....	71
6.e. The rich man and Lazarus.....	71
6.f. Shame and contempt.....	73
6.g. The fiery furnace.....	74
7. <i>The Stronger Evidence for Eternal Torment</i>	77
7.a. The lake of burning sulphur.....	77
7.b. Smoke of torment.....	77
7.c. Eternal smoke.....	78
7.d. Day and night.....	79
7.e. No rest.....	80
7.f. For ever.....	81
7.g. Nobody yet.....	81
7.h. Summary.....	81

Part Three: The Application

8. <i>Opportunities</i>	85
8.a. The evangelistic message.....	86
8.b. Motivating Christians.....	89
8.c. Salvation, purpose and goals.....	90
8.d. God's wrath.....	92
8.e. Countering extremism.....	94
8.f. Love for the lost.....	96
8.g. Good news, good God.....	100
8.h. The undiscovered country.....	101
9. <i>Conclusion</i>	103
9.a. The reality of Hell.....	103
9.b. The reality of judgement.....	103
9.c. The truth of the gospel message.....	105
9.d. A personal reflection.....	106

Appendices

1. <i>About this Book</i>	111
1.a. A personal background.....	111
1.b. Why write it this way?.....	111
1.c. Use of language.....	113
1.d. Talking about God.....	114
1.e. The difficulty of talking about God.....	114
2. <i>Salvation</i>	117
2.a. Relationship.....	118
2.b. Event and process.....	120

2.c.	The traditional model of the salvation event.....	120
2.d.	Another model of the salvation event.....	122
2.e.	The salvation process.....	126
2.f.	The salvation choice.....	130
3.	<i>Fair Punishment</i>	137
3.a.	The need for fairness.....	138
3.b.	What God does must be fair.....	138
3.c.	God is holy.....	138
3.d.	God's glory demands it.....	140
3.e.	A mathematical interlude.....	141
3.f.	Eternal torment encourages bad behaviour.....	142
3.g.	Punishment for what?.....	143
3.h.	Any punishment is inconsistent.....	144
3.i.	No time.....	145
3.j.	Justice and punishment.....	146
3.k.	The fairness of destruction.....	146
4.	<i>Some Further Details</i>	149
4.a.	The nature of spiritual fire.....	149
4.b.	'Destruction' means destruction!.....	151
4.c.	Heaven and Earth.....	152
4.d.	Eternity.....	155
4.e.	Immortality.....	155
4.f.	Hell in the Old Testament.....	156
4.g.	Hell in the New Testament.....	157
4.h.	Destruction in the New Testament.....	159
5.	<i>Further Reading</i>	161
6.	<i>Index of Bible References</i>	167

Foreword

God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

This wonderful verse must be one of the most, if not the most, loved verses in the Bible. As an evangelist and a pastor, I must have preached and shared it more times than I can remember. However, I wonder how many times I have taken the trouble to explain what it is that Jesus, God's Son, has saved us from by giving us eternal life.

What does it mean to say I shall not perish? What does perishing mean? It certainly sounds like something I should avoid, but is perishing something best left ill-defined; not talked about; left to each person's own imagination?

Popular views held by the Christian church, through the centuries, seem to present a God to us who is, to put it mildly, not too Christian. Despite the designation "love", He appears to enjoy perishing His created humans with torment never ending. In like manner some church leaders have said that if as a Christian you cannot enjoy this eternal activity of God and go along with Him in it, you should question your own eternal salvation! Is this what God is really like? Jesus Christ said if you have seen me you have seen the Father (God). How can we resolve this complex contradictory character of the Christian God? Or have we got something wrong somewhere?

Paul Hazelden has served us well in "The Other Place". It is a great honour to be asked to commend his careful, sensitive, meticulous work. Indeed it is a pleasure, since his love for God and for his fellow human beings shine out throughout his treatise, leading us into truth on this matter of the destiny of those who sadly refuse a relationship with their creator God. Paul's love for the Bible means he treats it with care and submission. Truth is carefully elicited from it and apparent contradictions resolved, and errors, often sincerely held, are gently corrected.

Wrong views on the destiny of the lost have not only led to wrong views of God, but justified inquisitions, torture and burnings of those with whom we disagree. Wrong views of God promote such behaviours as being consistent with God's presumed character. So our subject, 'perishing', difficult, distracting and disturbing as it might seem, is essential for healthy Christianity. I wish to work for a healthier church in this violent and aggressive world. Paul's work "The Other Place" will help us to participate in this recovery of a truer church with The true God.

Paul, we thank you for your labour of love, adherence to the scripture and devotion to Jesus Christ. I'm praying many will have more confidence in communicating the message of the love of God through "The Other Place". In fact, right through the other place, the place where Jesus hung on a cross for us and our sins, leading us into the joy of heaven itself.

Roger T. Forster

January 2017

Preface

Firstly, thank you for picking up this work. I recognise it may not have been easy: people often shy away from thinking about death and related subjects. I hope and pray you will find it worthwhile.

What happens to us after death? People have always had an understandable fascination with this question. It is hard to find anyone who has not given thought to the subject, and every religious tradition around the world has something to say about it.

Jesus clearly had quite a lot to say about the next life. If He thought that we need to understand the subject and take it seriously, however uncomfortable it may make us feel, perhaps we should give it more attention than we usually do.

Mainstream Christianity offers people the prospect of two very different possible futures. Perhaps inevitably, one is good and the other bad. We usually call them ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell’, although the Biblical writers use a variety of terms. In the New Testament, for example, there are three main words used to refer to Hell (or something like it): *hades*, *abyssos* and *gehenna* (for more about the original words used, please see Appendix 4.g, ‘Hell in the New Testament’).

Whatever words we use, mainstream Christian teaching clearly says that some people will go to Heaven and some to ‘the other place’; but, whichever way they go, the teachers are generally quite certain that everyone will stay where they have been sent for all eternity. Thinking about Hell may be unpleasant, but we tend to think the doctrine is clear and settled.

However, our understanding of Hell has changed a great deal over the centuries. We may all know what a ‘Hell-fire sermon’ is like, but I guess that very few of us these days have actually sat through one.¹

There was a time when many preachers would describe the torments of Hell in graphic detail; when it was normal to describe Hell as a place where demons stick pitchforks into writhing bodies, a place where the unsaved suffer eternally while the saved look on and enjoy watching their pain.

Few people today explicitly teach such things, but they have been popular beliefs, taught and believed by many Christians in the past. And, while most people have discarded the details, the essence of the teaching – Hell as a place of eternal suffering – has been retained by most evangelicals. But are they right?

If we are to follow the teaching of the Bible, what *should* we believe about the fate of the wicked? Most importantly, if we are Christians, what does Jesus have to say on the subject?

¹ The people I have met who were traumatised by teaching about eternal torment generally received this teaching through Bible studies and one to one conversations, not from a public sermon.

My main purpose in writing this is to offer a popular guide to Hell – what Jesus had to say about it, how Jesus picks up the Old Testament’s teaching, and how the disciples who came after Jesus consistently passed on His message. (If you find yourself wondering about the style, scope or size of this book and would like to know more, please see Appendix 1, ‘About this Book’.)

We generally think and talk about Heaven and Hell as places: when people die, we often say they ‘go to Heaven’; on TV or in films, when a character is trying to kill someone, they often say “See you in Hell!” In the Bible, neither Heaven nor Hell are understood primarily as places we can go to. In much the same way as we talk about ‘going to university’, our language is talking about a place, but what we mean has far more to do with what happens in that place. For the sake of convenience, we may talk about people going to Heaven or going to Hell: what matters is not so much the location as what happens there, and what the location signifies.

There is a significant danger whenever Christians start to talk about the afterlife. The main focus of Biblical teaching is on this world and this life. Wherever you look in the Bible, the important issue, the focus, is on how you live here and now; despite our fascination with the question, there is very little in the Bible about what happens to us after death.

In fact, most of what the Bible does tell us is about what *doesn't* happen: Isaiah provides us with this typical example.

For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise. (Isaiah 38:18)

The Psalmist asks various questions.

Do you show your wonders to the dead?
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?
Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction?
Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion? (Psalm 88:10-12)

And the answer is clearly, ‘No!’ Not even God remembers the dead (Psalm 88:5). The Biblical writers determinedly concentrate on this life, and what we do with it. But even if we focus our efforts and energy on this life and how to live it, the question still remains: what happens to us after death?

We seem reasonably content, in mainstream Christian teaching, to be fairly agnostic about the joys of Heaven. On the one hand, nobody really believes the popular image of floating on clouds with harps; on the other hand, we don’t reject the idea and go searching for a better description. We are happy to leave the picture wonderfully unclear – at least, in our sermons and official teaching.

(However, it seems to me that the lack of clear, Biblical teaching about Heaven in many of our churches does leave the door open to some un-Biblical and unhelpful beliefs about the nature of Heaven: we touch on this briefly in Part Three: The Application.)

But if our image of Heaven is vague, our image of the other place is disturbingly clear. Not only clear, but also (I argue) both wrong and harmful. And that is the point

of this discussion. (I would like you to feel this is a conversation: something you engage with, that stimulates your own thoughts and reflections.)

The nature of Hell is not just a nice, interesting theological issue, something to discuss on a long Sunday afternoon when you have nothing more urgent to do. What we believe happens after death affects us in many ways: once people discover they can talk to me about death, heaven and Hell, and be listened to, it is astonishing how often they say that these issues have had a deep impact on their life.

There is a strange inconsistency in our teaching. Christians often don't see it, but people outside the Church generally do. According to Jesus, we worship a God Who commands us to love our enemies; but this same God, we say, inflicts eternal torment on those who reject Him. How does this make sense?

And how is eternal torment consistent with Jesus' teaching that we should be merciful as our Heavenly Father is merciful?

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:35-36)

If you believe that God torments His enemies for all eternity, this has to affect your understanding of such passages. Am I really supposed to love my enemies the way my Heavenly Father does? Should I be merciful in the same way that He is merciful?

We can usually put questions like these to the back of our minds: we can choose to focus our attention on more palatable truths. Most of the time.

But when people we care about die, the question of their eternal fate forces itself upon us. When we have no assurance that they are 'in' (or, maybe, 'going to' or 'destined for') Heaven, then the nature of Hell becomes bitingly relevant.

I have lost count of the number of people I have talked with, who had recently lost someone and who were struggling to cope – not only with their loss, but also with the teaching they had always accepted: teaching which they never really paid much attention to when it was remote and abstract, but which suddenly has dreadful meaning when it is very present and concrete.

"Do you think," I have been asked on various occasions, "that my wife (or husband, parent or child) is now burning in Hell?"

The pain of that question, sometimes the obvious agony of the person asking it, stays with me. A friend can duck the question: "I don't know," is an honest and acceptable (if not helpful) response. But I was often with them, not only as a friend but also as a Pastor, and a Pastor is expected to do better. A Pastor is expected to know about such things.

A Pastor is expected to comfort the bereaved, but is also expected to tell the truth. How do you do that if you believe the loved one is suffering unspeakable torment, which will continue for all eternity? What can you say?

You may not be a Pastor, Vicar, Priest, or any other form of church leader, but the chances are that at some point you will be with someone struggling with this question. At some point, you may be facing it yourself.

Comforting someone who has just been bereaved is not the ideal context for theological instruction: at this point, they probably need to be held rather more than they need to be informed. If the question is troubling them, a personal assurance is generally sufficient at that point. I can say with integrity: “I do not believe your loved one will suffer eternal torment; I can explain why, if you are interested, but not now.”

Strong emotion will get in the way of anyone processing intellectual content, but it sometimes helps people to hear us say what we believe, in a clear, confident and compassionate way. That is, assuming we *can* say what we believe in a clear, confident and compassionate way. The reasons why we believe their loved one will not suffer can wait until they are ready and able to process such material, but the clear offer – “I can talk you through this, when you are ready” – can be a significant part of the comfort you offer there and then.

The suffering of those left behind is not always what you might expect. When a child has been traumatised by an abusive parent for years, the death of that parent can bring welcome relief – which generally carries in its wake a load of guilt for feeling glad that someone has died.

That mixture of grief and guilt is hard enough to cope with. But then a well-meaning friend (who probably knows nothing about the trauma) assures the survivor, “Don’t worry: I’m sure your father (or mother or uncle ...) is waiting for you in Heaven,” and the pain takes on a sinister edge. You really need to have something to say then.

But, again, what can you say? “Yes, they are burning in Hell, but they deserve it,” may be a ‘correct’ answer according to mainstream Christian teaching, but will probably cause emotional and psychological scarring for life.

Another ‘correct’ answer might be that your loved one is sleeping right now, but after the resurrection and final judgement they will be burning in Hell while you enjoy yourself in Heaven. But opinions vary on the subject, and I’m not sure it makes a lot of difference either way to the emotional damage.

The most common response seems to go along the lines of, “I don’t know about your partner (or parent or child ...) but I know that God is good and can be trusted to do what is right.” This seems to be socially acceptable in most circumstances, but it doesn’t answer the question.

I have talked with a number of pastors about this subject, and their experience seems to vary a great deal. For some, eternal torment is a significant issue; for others, it hardly registers. There is no point in speculating on the reasons for this, but one thing I am sure about: if people do not raise the question, this does not mean there is no problem.

In talking with bereaved people, I find they are normally very sensitive to other people’s feelings. They generally understand very clearly what “I know that God is good and can be trusted to do what is right” actually means: “I don’t have an answer, I

feel uncomfortable dealing with this subject and don't want to talk about it." The standard response says that the church does not have an answer to the most pressing question they have in their life; the pastoral help they need right now is just not available.

If the question is, "Is my loved one burning in Hell?" and the response is, "We know that God is good and can be trusted to do the right thing," as far as I can see, this response can only be interpreted in one of two ways.

- The first possibility is that your loved one is probably in Heaven, because good people will end up in Heaven even if (as far as we know) they have never shown any interest in God in their lifetime.
- The second possibility is that your loved one is probably burning in Hell, but that is okay because God knows this is the right thing to do.

Neither option works for me. We either tell them that evangelism is pointless, or condemn them to endless sleepless nights. There is a third option, but they are probably not aware of it – after all, if they are asking the question, it is unlikely they have heard what the Bible teaches: that unbelievers will cease to exist. (The usual theological term for this idea is 'conditional immortality'.)

The question remains: if you believe in eternal torment and you are pressed for a real answer, do you clearly give the truth as you understand it, do you lie, do you fudge the issue or somehow avoid answering? I don't know. Fortunately, I don't have to make such choices, and neither do you. There is a better option: No, they are not burning in Hell. God loves each one of us, your loved one included, so much that he gives us the choice – to live in relationship with Him, or to go our own way and perish without Him.

Mainstream Christian teaching about Hell is, in my view, and in the eyes of many people I have talked with, cold and harsh. Cold and harsh does not speak to me about Jesus. That does not, in itself, make it wrong (my understanding of Jesus may be inadequate), but it probably should alert us to the possibility that we might have missed something.

Quite frankly, I find this hard to believe. But, after years of study and prayer and research and many long, long conversations, I have come to the conclusion that, yes, we have missed something. We have missed the consistent, simple, clear and humane teaching of the Bible on this subject. We have somehow ignored what Jesus has to say about it: the final state of those who reject God is not torment, but destruction.

This subject matters. Not just because we need to be able to talk to people who are suffering and offer them some help, not just because it makes a significant difference to our evangelism, but mainly because it directly addresses the largest and most important question of them all: *what is God like?*

What we believe about the character of the God we worship affects our lives. What we believe about the way He treats those who oppose Him will feed through in some way to the way we treat those who oppose us. Our beliefs shape our lives, and believing untrue things about our Heavenly Father will inevitably distort the way we grow, both emotionally and spiritually.

Conversations about the probable fate of a loved one will never be easy. But if we follow the Bible's teaching on this matter, we can talk about the things it tells us, with clarity, integrity and compassion.

More importantly, we can talk with confidence about God: about a God Who is not only holy, but Who is love, a God Who is good – good to everyone, not just to those who follow Him.

Part One: The Key Issues

1. Introduction

Part One contains all the essential material: the necessary background, plus a clear statement of the Bible's teaching about Hell as found in a few well-known and representative passages.

1.a. The traditional doctrine

For some time now, mainstream evangelical Christianity has believed (or claimed to believe) a fairly unchanging message about Hell, held consistently across a range of denominations and traditions. The demons-with-pitchforks detail has been rejected, as has the idea that the saved should enjoy the suffering of the damned; but the core part of the traditional teaching has been retained: after death (or so we are taught), the unsaved will suffer eternal deliberate conscious torment.

In my experience, most non-believers recoil in horror when faced with this idea. Their response is generally along fairly predictable lines: if that is what your God does, then I don't want anything to do with Him. It is not always phrased as politely as this.

And then, when they are prepared to listen, the message gets even worse. Not only do we teach that the unsaved will suffer for all time, but we then explain that this punishment is justified because they have sinned against a Holy God. We tell them that we think this punishment is right, and we tell them that the God we worship thinks so too.

We think we are telling people about a God of love – but what they hear us talking about as a result of this doctrine is a God of hate. Very few Christians have any idea just how much this teaching shapes the way people outside the Church understand the Christian faith; but, if you go and look, it is very easy to uncover the 'Christian' message many people have heard and rejected. Here is just one fairly normal example, taken from a web forum conversation.

Even if we were to DO all of the things that religions ask of us, if we do not BELIEVE and SUPPORT 100% of the nonsense, 100% of the errors, 100% of the atrocities, 100% of the inaccuracies, then there is no hope for us. If you do not believe in even an iota of it, then in God's point of view, you are already screwed. He can roast your skin, beat your head, drive rods through your face, and pour molten brass down your throat, all for not believing in things you had plenty of reason to doubt. FOR EVER, by the way. That is 700 billion years, times 900 billion, plus another 700 billion, and another, times a million, plus another hundred billion, times another, and another, and another ... you get the idea. Actually, no you do not. You can not. It is insane.

Many Christians are very happy to reinforce this message: I have heard evangelistic sermons which spell it out in agonising detail. You can easily find examples like this in books and on the Internet.

Sin against an infinitely holy God demands an infinite punishment. The severity of the punishment points to the holiness of God. He is so righteous that the just penalty for offending His holiness is something so horrible as eternal conscious torment. It would actually be unjust for God not to punish sin eternally, because to do so would belittle the value and glory of His worthiness.²

(A slightly longer version of this quote, along with a brief response, is provided in Appendix 3, ‘Fair Punishment’.)

Where does this teaching come from? You can answer that question in several ways, depending on your area of interest.

From the **human perspective**, I suspect the arguments to justify eternal torment arise from our need to find a moral basis for this belief – to explain why one small sin is enough to send us to a Hell where we will endure torment for all eternity. And we have to explain it because it seems so wrong. (Of course, I think it *seems wrong* for a very simple reason: *it is wrong!*)

From the **theological perspective**, for many Christians, the doctrine of Original Sin explains everything. This is not entirely straightforward: the relevance and importance of Original Sin depends on your understanding of this doctrine and a number of related issues, generally brought together under the heading of Calvinism. We are not going to undertake a detailed exploration of either Calvinism or Original Sin, but there are two brief points to make on the subject.

- Firstly, in practical terms, Original Sin is rarely (if ever) spelled out in evangelistic sermons. If it is believed to be helpful in explaining why eternal torment is a fair punishment, why is it not used more?
- Secondly, in theological terms, Original Sin does not solve this problem – it actually makes the problem worse. Within the framework provided by this doctrine, eternal torment becomes more unjust and harder to explain.

From a **historic perspective**, the doctrine of eternal torment came from Greek philosophy, not the Bible. In Christian theology, Tertullian taught it for the first time around 240 AD, building on a mixture of Christian doctrine and Platonism which had entered the Church in the previous century. It is mentioned once in Judith 16:17 (a ‘deuterocanonical’ book present in the Greek Septuagint and probably dating back to the second or early first century B.C.), but we have no record of it entering Christian teaching before Tertullian.

None of the early Church Fathers believed in eternal torment. How did the idea of eternal torment arrive in the Greek philosophy? I have heard it argued by some that it came from Egypt, and by others that it came from Northern Europe; it is possible that both are true.

Wherever the teaching came from, it has become a mainstream doctrine,

2 Mike Riccardi, ‘Does the Doctrine of Hell Make God Unjust?’ (thecripplegate.com/does-the-doctrine-of-hell-make-god-unjust/)

sometimes taught, sometimes implied, sometimes simply accepted as valid, in much of the organised church.

Outside a few evangelistic sermons, it may well be that eternal torment is not often preached with relish any more, but it is still consistently taught. If you have any doubts, have a look at any of the standard works of Systematic Theology – you will find several listed in Appendix 5, ‘Further Reading’.

How far it is actually believed is another question: in my experience, when pressed in public, most evangelical Christians will reluctantly confirm that they believe the official doctrine; but many will confess to uncertainty about it when talking in private.

But does the Bible really teach us about ‘infinite punishment’? If we want to follow Jesus honestly and faithfully, do we have to believe that the unsaved will suffer eternal torment?

This question matters, because the answer we give affects a number of important issues.

- It affects the way we understand **God’s goodness**. How can a good God deliberately increase the amount of suffering in the universe? How can a good God create an eternity of suffering? If we believe that God, in the end, acts like a sadist, why do we condemn sadists for the way *they* behave?
- It affects our understanding of **God’s love**. “God loves you,” we confidently proclaim. But if you don’t do what He says, He will torment you for all eternity, we think. Most people would consider that an odd, somewhat dysfunctional, form of love. Would you want to be loved by someone who threatens to torment you?
- It affects our understanding of **God’s justice**. In a fair judicial system, the punishment must fit the crime – it must be appropriate and proportionate to the offence. However bad the crime, it is hard to see how an infinite amount of suffering can possibly be considered either appropriate or proportionate. All the arguments we use when we explain why this is fair simply have the effect of establishing that justice in God’s eyes looks nothing like justice to us.
- It affects our **pastoral care**. It is hard to comfort someone who believes a dead friend or family member is now roasting over the eternal fire. And it is hard to explain why the God Who, we had assured them, loved their relative so deeply just a day or two ago, is now treating them so cruelly.
- It affects our **credibility**. The popular images of Hell are ridiculous and absurd. If people think we want them to become Christians in order to avoid the demons-with-pitchforks routine, it is no wonder they are often reluctant to respond to our message. If they hear that we want them to come and worship a monster who will hurt them terribly if He does not get His way, it is no wonder they reject our invitation.

- It affects our **evangelistic message**. Apart from misrepresenting the character of God, we find it hard to present any coherent evangelistic message if (being unable to face the alternative possibility) we tell people that their unsaved relations were probably ‘really’ Christians all along, and are probably waiting in Heaven for them.

Whatever we believe on this subject, it seems clear that eternal torment is not some minor theological detail: what we believe about this shapes our understanding of the character of God, our Christian faith, our evangelism and our pastoral care.

So what, exactly, is the content of this doctrine of eternal torment? As we have already observed, the dominant teaching in mainstream evangelical thought, (when we are taught anything at all!) is that the unsaved will be sent to Hell, where they will suffer eternal, deliberate and conscious torment. Each of these details is significant.

- It is **eternal**: the pain will continue without easing and without ending. Hold onto the concept of ‘eternal’ meaning ‘without ending’ as this is a key point we will return to.
- It is **deliberate**: God deliberately and intentionally chooses to make them suffer in this way.
- It is **conscious**: the people in Hell know who they are, and really feel the pain.
- It is **torment**: it is more than just an absence of pleasure; the people in Hell are not only excluded from the pleasures of Heaven, but also made to feel intense pain.

This last point is the one which many Christians express doubts about in my conversations with them: I am frequently told they prefer to believe in a Hell where the unsaved suffer regret but not active torment. Of course, personal preference is not a recommended method for determining doctrine, even if it is in practice a very common one.

Among those who believe in eternal torment these days (it was not always the case), it is generally accepted that this punishment is a sad necessity: we are repeatedly told that God does not want to punish people in this way, but He has to because we are sinners and (unless we have been forgiven through Jesus’ death), we must be punished for our sin.

There is little disagreement on either of these last two points: we are clearly sinners, and sin must be punished somehow. But there is deep disagreement about whether the need to punish our sin necessitates eternal torment.

People have argued for eternal torment on various grounds over the years. There are three main strands to these arguments: what the Bible says, Christian tradition, and the arguments from other sources.

In the main body of this book, we are seeking to focus on what the Bible has to say on the subject, and especially focus on what Jesus has to say. Does He, and does anyone in the Bible teach us that the unsaved will suffer eternal torment, or do they teach us that the unsaved will perish?

Christian tradition is too large a subject to cover in a work of this size (or in a

hundred works of this size), but we briefly consider the main arguments, both from Christian tradition and from other sources (such as the suggestion that eternal torment is fair, while destruction is unfair) in Appendix 3, ‘Fair Punishment’.

We should note that there has always been a strong opposition to the doctrine of eternal torment, and many respected (I have heard them described as ‘otherwise sound’!) church leaders have not believed it. But I’m not going to try listing the people: partly because I don’t want to get into the ‘they couldn’t believe that’ and ‘they probably changed their minds’ arguments; partly because it merges seamlessly into the examination of the doctrine in Christian tradition and is far too ambitious a task; but mostly because I want to focus on and thoroughly engage with the question of what the Bible teaches about this subject. I am interested in knowing what a range of famous Christians have believed over the centuries, but no list of important supporters will ever be enough to prove a doctrine either true or false.

If you wish to research this subject further, it is worth looking at the history and development of the various ideas about the nature of Hell. For many centuries, teaching about this topic within Christendom was controlled very carefully. There are at least two good reasons for this: firstly, because of the formal role the institutional church played within the structures of the state; and secondly, because each of the possible doctrines were believed to produce very different social consequences – a matter of great importance when a powerful elite are seeking to control the common population.

If you wish to follow up on the history and social use of the doctrine of Hell, the most helpful text I have found is by D P Walker, *The Decline of Hell*.³ Sadly, it has been out of print for some time, and second hand copies are often expensive when they can be found.

But this work is not about the history of the doctrines; and neither is it about the ways they have been used or the social consequences. All I aim to do here is to look clearly at what the Bible teaches us on the subject, with a primary focus on what Jesus has to say.

Some Christians object to the ‘demons-with-pitchforks’ image of Hell: they neither believe it nor do they teach it. They are (I think, rightly) concerned that very few people today can take seriously the image of creatures with horns and tails sticking pitchforks into the damned. They feel that in rejecting the pantomime image, they have adequately responded to the problem: according to them, we should not stir up problems where none exist.

But the problems do exist. People outside the Church may not understand what we mean by ‘grace’, but they do understand the doctrine of eternal torment.

- **They hear it.** Whether we teach it or not, many people outside the church think this is what we believe. So it is what they *hear* whether we *say* it or not – unless we are very careful to communicate something different.
- **They understand it.** When I talk with people outside the church, their issue is not with the pitchforks, but with what the pitchforks symbolise – with the suffering they hear us (sometimes gleefully?) promise to unbelievers.

3 Details of this and other relevant books can be found in Appendix 5, ‘Further Reading’.

- **Our integrity suffers.** If we believe in eternal torment but do not mention it, then our hearers are right to be suspicious that we are not telling them the whole story, and serious questions can be raised about our integrity – it seems that we are misleading them in order to get them saved, which cannot be right.

If Christians believe and teach that God sends people to eternal, deliberate and conscious torment, it makes no real difference whether the torment is caused by the eternal fire He places there, by the demons with pitchforks He sends there, by any combination of the two or by anything else: if people suffer in Hell, it is because God wants this to happen.

We need to mention the thorny issue of free will here, simply to point out that whatever your position may be on the subject, the doctrine of free will neither creates any problems nor solves them. It is my belief that God does not make us sin, but whatever you believe on that subject (however responsible you believe we are for our own sin), it is clear that God and God alone decides what will happen to unrepentant sinners. To argue that God ‘must’ do something (other than to affirm that He must be true to Himself) is to claim that something greater than God is controlling or constraining Him, a belief which fits uncomfortably with traditional Christian doctrine.

The exact details of the nature of the torment are completely irrelevant: what matters is that (according to this belief) God chooses to send people to suffer this torment. Forever. With no hope of forgiveness. With no possibility that this suffering will ever end. And we then try to convince our listeners that this same God is a God of love. Pitchforks or not, that’s a difficult job.

1.b. Alternatives to torment

Given that eternal torment is such a dreadful prospect, it is not surprising that people have looked for alternatives. There are only a few possibilities which have significant support, and they can be summarised quite easily. It has been suggested that the essential nature of hell is that is it:

- painful;
- empty;
- joyless;
- Godless; or
- destruction.

Painful. This is the traditional position – understanding Hell as a place of unending conscious torment. It is the default position of most mainstream Christian denominations, so I want to be particularly clear about what the relevant Biblical texts have to say about this position.

Empty. The technical terms for this position is ‘Universalism’. People who have a problem with the traditional teaching about Hell often explore the possibility of Universalism: the belief that everyone will be saved – Hell (as it is commonly understood) may or may not really exist, but either nobody actually goes there or

nobody stays there for all eternity.

A full response to this idea is beyond the scope of this work, but in brief: Universalism solves one problem (God is no longer presented as being a cruel monster) but it creates more problems (among them – how we make sense of the many passages in the Bible about Hell, about the necessity of choosing to respond to God and about judgement). If my reading of the Bible is correct on this point, then we have no need to turn to Universalism in order to preserve God's character.

The doctrine of Universalism rests on two main planks: firstly, that in the end everything and everyone will be united in Jesus; and secondly, that Jesus died for the sins of the world. We address the first one in section 5.i, 'No more tears' and the second in Appendix 2.d, 'Another model of the salvation event'.

Joyless. Some people, recognising that the Bible does talk repeatedly about people being sent to Hell, seek to solve the problems caused by eternal torment by removing the idea of torment from the picture. They suggest that the people in Hell will be excluded from the joys of Heaven, and this is punishment enough.

The two obvious weaknesses of this option are: firstly, the Bible says very little about the joys of Heaven, so basing a doctrine on the promised absence of those joys is difficult; and secondly, it is hard to interpret most of the Biblical passages about Hell as referring to an eternal lack of joy. I don't respond in detail to this option, but much of the material about eternal torment will apply equally well here.

Godless. This can be seen as a variant of the 'joyless' understanding, God being the source of all true joy. It has some Biblical justification: the central promise of Heaven is not happiness or pleasure, but fellowship with God, the joy of being in His presence. If Heaven is about God's presence, then it makes sense that Hell will be about God's absence.

Many people hold to some version of this position: people in Hell are separated from God; or the people in Hell know they are excluded from God's presence; or the suffering of people in Hell is caused by their knowledge that they are excluded from fellowship with God.

This argument makes sense, and it is certainly attractive. It solves the central emotional and intellectual problem with the doctrine of eternal torment – that it turns our loving Heavenly Father into a monster Who deliberately inflicts an unimaginable quantity of suffering on people; according to this understanding, God merely withholds His presence from the people who do not want to be with Him, granting their desire.

The argument does make sense, but the Biblical writers do not make this connection. The wicked are never threatened with continued existence away from the presence of God, and it is doubtful whether any of them would consider this to be even possible. Certainly, the Psalmist seems to be clear on the subject.

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there (Psalm 139:7-8)

I understand this idea primarily as a halfway position between the traditional eternal torment and the Biblical conditional immortality. The arguments for this position are also arguments for conditional immortality; conditional immortality has the advantage of enjoying Biblical support, while this position lacks it.

Destruction. The Bible consistently threatens the wicked with punishment and with destruction: these two strands of Biblical teaching are entirely consistent – destruction can be understood either as the threatened punishment or as a significant aspect of the threatened punishment. The central focus of this book is to establish that this is the picture of Hell taught by Jesus and repeated throughout the New Testament; it is also consistently found in the Old Testament.

The Bible does not tell us many things we would like to know. But it does tell us about some aspects of what happens after death; in particular, it talks repeatedly and clearly about the fate of the unsaved, so let us carefully consider what the Bible actually tells us about this subject.

1.c. A gentle start

We are going to be looking at a lot of Biblical passages, seeking to understand them and be clear about what they are actually saying. But, before we do, let us quickly set the scene.

There are a number of Biblical passages where ‘save’ and ‘destroy’ (or similar terms) are put together. I’m not suggesting that, on its own, this proves anything; but it does seem to provide an insight into how the Biblical writers understand the concept of salvation and what the alternative might be.

So, to get us started, I will just list a few verses without comment. They can hover in the background while we consider other passages in more detail.

Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent. (Mark 3:4)

But He turned and rebuked them, and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” (Luke 9:55-56, NASB; not all manuscripts include this passage)

[Those who passed by were] saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:40)

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. (James 4:12)

‘I am with you and will save you,’ declares the LORD. ‘Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you.’ (Jeremiah 30:11)

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)(John 3:16)

1.d. Destruction, not torment

Before we jump into the details, I would like to establish a few basic points that do not depend on individual texts. Any discussion of this area will be confused and will probably be mistaken unless we get the context right – unless our ‘big picture’ is a Biblical one.

To make my position clear from the outset, I believe that it is – just – possible to interpret the Biblical texts in a way which supports the traditional position, *but there are no Biblical grounds for doing so, and many good reasons not to.*

If you came to the Biblical texts without an awareness of the traditional teaching, you would never interpret them in that way. There is nothing in the Biblical texts which requires eternal torment of the unsaved, and a great deal which either suggests or explicitly teaches destruction. And the more we delve into the details studied by the academics – the history, language, philosophy and culture of the people who wrote the Bible – the more destruction makes sense and the less eternal torment fits the facts.

In brief:

- the traditional position is not the natural, obvious way to read the Biblical texts;
- the traditional position requires us to assume all the main writers in the New Testament were incredibly bad communicators on this vital topic;
- there are no Biblical reasons to reject the simple, obvious meaning of the relevant passages; and
- everything we learn about the people who wrote the Bible suggests that they believed in destruction rather than eternal torment.

The overwhelming weight of evidence in the Bible suggests that people who do not go to Heaven will cease to exist. The usual theological term for this idea is ‘conditional immortality’. I talk with people about this subject fairly regularly, and few have heard the term. The theological jargon is unimportant (and I will do my best to steer away from it wherever possible) – but the idea, the truth behind the term is absolutely vital.

At least, that’s how I feel. I hope by the time you finish this, you will feel the same way too.

To summarise the clear teaching of the Bible:

- on the last day, the dead will be resurrected;
- there will be a time of judgement before the throne of God;
- those who through Jesus have inherited eternal life will receive their reward; and
- those who have rejected God will receive their punishment and be destroyed.

When we put together all the teaching on this subject in the New Testament, it seems very likely that this destruction will not take place the moment their sentence is passed: they will be given time to understand and respond to their sentence; the process of destruction may take some time and may hurt; but when the destruction is complete, the person will cease to exist and their pain will have come to an end too.

At least, this seems very likely to me. But please remember – the details of what happens to us after death are much less important than the clear and simple choice God sets before us: we can choose Him and live, or reject Him and die.

You can understand this destruction in at least three distinct ways, each of which is valid – that is, each of which expresses a perspective with considerable Biblical support.

- It is the **punishment** promised by God.
- It is the automatic **result** of rejecting God (John 3:16).
- It is an inevitable **consequence** of the freedom God gives us to respond to His love or to reject Him. If we seek Him, we will find him (Jeremiah 29:13); if we reject Him, he will reject us (Matthew 10:32-33, 2 Timothy 2:12).

I am not suggesting that any of these three perspectives (or all three of them together) prove that my understanding is true; but they are evidence that the Biblical writers engaged with the doctrine of destruction and sought to understand it. This undermines the claim which is sometimes made that they used the language of destruction but actually believed something different.

Not only is destruction clearly taught in the Bible, but we can also find there clear evidence of the various ways in which the Biblical writers have understood the destruction of those who reject God. We describe a number of these ways (all the important ones!) in the pages which follow.

There is, of course, no contradiction involved in suggesting several ways of understanding the doctrine of destruction, just as there are several ways of understanding what Jesus did on the cross. As a simple analogy, consider why I gave my wife flowers: because I love her; because she likes flowers; and because it was her birthday. There is one event with three valid reasons, and we have no need to ask which of them is the ‘real’ reason.

By way of contrast, there are no passages describing the ways in which the Biblical writers sought to understand eternal torment. The most reasonable explanation for this is that the Biblical writers never sought to understand it because they never believed it, and never even considered it a possibility worth discussing.

1.e. The unspoken threat?

Unlike the repeated teaching about destruction, the doctrine of eternal torment is simply not taught in the Bible. What the people who believe in eternal torment would like is a passage in the Bible that describes such a fate – a passage that reads something like this.

Anyone who has died without faith in God is suffering unspeakable torment which will last for all eternity.

In fact, there are numerous passages which tell us what happens to people after death, and they offer us a very different picture. For example, Paul tells us in Romans about people who have died. We know what he should have said if eternal torment were true, but what he actually said was:

anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (Romans 6:7)

It's not quite the same.

This missing doctrine makes a massive difference to the way we read our Bible. Let us take just one example. What do you hear Jesus saying in this familiar passage?

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

If you believe in eternal torment, what you hear Him *really* saying will be something like this.

If you come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, I will give you rest – but if you don't come to me, I will give you eternal torment.

In our dealings with other people, we often expect them to use both the carrot and the stick: if you do what I want, I will help you; if you don't do what I want, I will hurt you. The threat is hardly ever spoken, but it doesn't need to be – we know it is there, so we hear it anyway; which is why when Jesus does not state a threat (“But if you don't come to me ...”) explicitly, we can still hear it.

But what if there is no threat? What if the only penalty for failing to receive the blessing that Jesus offers us is ... that we fail to receive the blessing? What if the invitation (“Come to me ...”) really is what He wants us to hear Him saying?

If eternal torment is true, every gentle, kind, loving thing He says must be understood in the light of it. Of course, if eternal torment is true, every hard thing He says must also be understood in the light of it. I am *not* trying to pretend that His words are all sweetness and light. I *am* saying, however, that when He threatens something dreadful (Matthew 23:1-36 is an obvious example), that threat is always clear, spoken and explicit. He tells us the truth, and tells it straight, both the bits we want to hear and the bits we don't.

How does the threat of eternal torment change the ways we hear Jesus' words? Think of it like this: if you and I both know that I have the power to ruin your life, I can control you by making gentle suggestions: the language I use can be as kind and unthreatening as possible, it makes no difference – we both know what is going on. Other people may shout at you and try to make you do what they say, but I don't need to shout because we both know the consequences if you ignore my words. My words may be gentle, but my message is not.

We have to decide: is the threat of eternal torment missing because Jesus knows He doesn't need to say the threat out loud? Or is it missing because there genuinely is no threat? What is He *really* saying?

Of course, even if there is no threat (“Reject me and I will torment you”), the invitation still carries a condition: if you come to me, I will give you rest. If we do not come to Him, there is no promise of rest. Even if there is no threat, it is still really important that we respond to His invitation.

So: when Jesus says, “Come to me,” is He really giving an invitation, or making a threat? The character of the Jesus you encounter in the pages of the New Testament probably depends more than anything else on how you answer this question.

Some people feel that we each fashion Jesus in our own image, or at least in the image that best works for us. I'm sure this is true to a certain extent, but we also have access to objective evidence which can help us answer this question. One vital approach is to understand something of the world in which Jesus and the early disciples lived.

1.f. Greek and Hebrew souls

We live in a world which is dominated by Greek thought, and we do not always appreciate the extent to which some of our basic assumptions contradict the Hebrew world view.

After all, Christians understand our faith as the fulfilment of Jewish belief – we believe that God has revealed *more* than He revealed in the Old Testament, but it is the same God and the same fundamental truth – explained, corrected, clarified and revealed fully and finally in the person of Jesus. Nothing in the New Testament suggests that the Jews were wrong and the Greeks had been getting it right after all.

One of the key differences between Greek and Hebrew thought lies in their understanding of the soul. The Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul – when the body dies, the soul is freed from its earthly prison. Plato (along with many other ancient Greeks) believed in reincarnation, a doctrine which makes sense within this framework.

Some people have suggested that Plato's teaching about reincarnation was intended to be allegorical, which raises the obvious question: if it is an allegory, what is it an allegory about? There is no clear answer. It seems to me that the idea has arisen simply because some people are uncomfortable with the evidence that friendly, rational Plato believed in reincarnation. If you are interested, do take a look at what he says for yourself: it is easy to find the relevant passages in his works, and they are surprisingly readable.⁴ But this is a detail: the important point is that, in the Greek world, people generally believed in the immortality of the soul.

In the Hebrew world, by way of a contrast, people believed that the soul and living body make up an integrated whole. We can see this in the story of the creation of the human race.

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

The word for 'living being' is *nephesh*, which can be translated (amongst other things) as 'soul', 'living being', 'life', 'self' and 'person'. When the physical body (the dust) is made alive (given the breath of life) then Adam becomes a living soul. We don't have space here to unpack the distinction between 'spirit' and 'soul' – partly because the words are not used consistently in the Biblical writings. But in general terms, you can think of 'spirit' as being the life and 'soul' as being the personality.

In the Hebrew, the soul only really, fully exists when joined to a living body. Without the body, you only have a faint echo of the person, a memory of who they

4 The main passages can be found in the Republic (614-621) and Phaedo (70C ff., 81C-E, 106E-115A).

used to be – which is why (you may remember) the main thing we are told about the dead is what they cannot do. Without a living body, you don't really have a person, which is why the doctrine of resurrection is so important in the New Testament.

People sometimes describe the Hebrew person existing as the union of soul and living body through the analogy of a working computer consisting of powered hardware and software: the hardware is the body, the life is the electricity, and the person is the software. Hardware without software is just a lump of metal; software without hardware is just a set of files on a memory stick, but the two together, plus the electricity, gives you a working computer.

Running with this analogy for a moment: at death, the software is uploaded into God's memory banks; and, at the resurrection, it is downloaded into new hardware with more memory, a faster processor and a truly uninterruptable power supply. It's a neat picture, but not perfect – software can be installed on any hardware meeting the minimum specification, but your resurrection body will be *your* resurrection body, not just a standard mass-produced resurrection body. Remember that the disciples recognised Jesus when He entered the house (John 20:19-29), and His resurrection body still had the wounds in His hands and side. Resurrection retains the individuality of both your soul and your body.

Reincarnation, on the other hand, takes a pre-existing soul, places it into a new body and causes the soul to forget about its previous lives. There is not a great deal of continuity here: what survives is not the person, but the psychic material which a person is made out of, in almost the same way that the atoms of our physical body survive and, after death, go on to become part of other bodies.

While the idea of reincarnation makes sense within Greek thought, there is no suggestion of reincarnation within traditional Hebrew thought – there is no possibility of it, even. The only hope of a future life lies in the possibility of resurrection: a doctrine which is central to much of New Testament thought and implied in places but largely missing in explicit terms from the Old Testament, despite Job's astonishing and confident affirmation in Job 19:26.

The biblical conception of the believer's life beyond death is commonly expressed in the phrase 'the resurrection of the body' (1 Corinthians 15:35-58), which reflects the Bible's witness to the essential unity of the human person ... This contrasts with 'the immortality of the soul', the future state from the perspective of Platonic philosophy.⁵

When we think of the soul as the 'real' person, and the soul as being immortal, we are adopting a Greek rather than a Hebrew understanding – which makes a nonsense of God's command to Adam (Genesis 2:16-17). If Adam is 'really' an immortal soul which will continue to live after the body is gone, then "you will surely die" is an empty threat.

In Greek thought, it makes perfect sense to talk about punishing the souls of dead people. Their stories give us numerous examples: Tantalus suffering eternal hunger and thirst; Prometheus having his liver eaten every day by an eagle; Sisyphus rolling a boulder up a hill every day, only to see it roll back again. These stories are engaging and inventive, but that does not make them true.

5 Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, pages 327-328

The contrast in Hebrew literature could not be clearer. We do not find stories about dead people in the Old Testament: it would not make sense. There is no idea of a soul which is separate from the body or which becomes separated from the body at death. In Numbers 6:6 a decaying corpse is referred to as a ‘dead soul’: the rotting flesh is all that is left, all that remains of that which was once a soul.

The one apparent counter-example, of course, is the story of Saul and the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28:3-25). Samuel is dead and Saul does not know what to do, but the Lord is not speaking to Saul so Saul decides to consult Samuel through a medium. What are we to make of this story?

As far as I can tell, the majority of commentators (including, for example, both Luther and Calvin) believe that this was not a genuine summoning of the dead; the majority of the rest suggest that it was a totally unique event which God allowed or made possible at this critical turning point in Israel’s history.

Whatever your interpretation of the passage, the key thing to take away is the way this strange, troubling story is reflected and referenced in the rest of scripture. It’s not. The one passage which could serve as a ‘proof text’ for an immortal soul is completely ignored in the rest of the Bible. If the Biblical writers don’t see this passage as being significant, or teaching us about the nature of the afterlife, then I think we are probably safe in following their example.

We are left with a very clear picture on this fundamental point: the idea that dead souls could be tormented for all eternity – or even for some shorter period – just does not exist in Jewish teaching. You can’t torment a disembodied soul any more than you can swim in a dried-up river.

The ‘traditional’ evangelical position only makes sense if you adopt the Greek view that each person’s soul will continue to exist for all eternity – that souls are, by nature, indestructible – and therefore the souls of the damned must be *somewhere* and experiencing *something*.

The Hebrew view – shared by the writers of the New Testament, of course – is that Human souls are not, by nature, immortal. Immortality is an attribute of God, not of man. God, and God alone, is immortal (1 Timothy 6:16). The New Testament teaching is that we can *inherit* immortality, but this is in direct opposition to the Greek doctrine that all human beings are by nature immortal.

If there is any doubt about this, the story of the fall clearly presents a Biblical (Hebrew) view of the soul as opposed to the Greek view. Whether you understand the story as history or myth (or whether you reject both those familiar approaches and adopt a more nuanced position) the meaning of the story (in this area, at least) is very clear: we are mortal.

In the Genesis story, the fact of Adam’s mortality is presented as the reason for his banishment from the garden of Eden. Adam must not be allowed to eat from the tree of life, he must not live for ever – and therefore he is banished from the Garden (Genesis 3:22-24).

We often struggle to understand the Biblical text because, as we read it, we have in our minds Greek concepts and expectations, not Hebrew ones. Jesus and the early

Christians were all firmly rooted in Hebrew thought. While many of the New Testament writers – Paul and John are both good examples – could *use* Greek ideas when they were helpful, they were always working from a Hebrew background and mindset.

I should probably mention that this point about the difference between the Greek and Hebrew views of human life is, as far as I know, fully accepted by all reputable scholars – even if the implications are not widely understood. My understanding of eternal torment may be reasonably controversial, but this point is not. One nice summary puts it this way: “Christianity takes from Judaism the realistic recognition that man is an animated body and not an incarnated soul.”⁶

When we switch from a Greek to a Hebrew understanding of the soul, many of the Biblical passages about the afterlife suddenly take on a very different meaning. I hope that you will see this more clearly when we come to consider individual passages in Part Two.

You may remember that the technical term for the position described here is ‘conditional immortality’, not ‘annihilationism’, although the two are often confused. The difference between the two is that conditional immortality assumes the Hebrew understanding is correct: the human soul is mortal but *can* receive eternal life and become immortal; while annihilationism assumes the Greek understanding is correct: the human soul is by nature immortal, and it takes a deliberate act of God to take this immortality away.

1.g. Eternal life

The hope we are offered in the New Testament is repeatedly described as ‘life’ or ‘eternal life’. You don’t need me to quote chapter and verse for all the references here!⁷

But God’s *offer* of eternal life only makes sense if we do not already have it! People who believe in eternal torment do not believe that the unsaved need eternal life: according to them, the unsaved already have it! The problem, as they present it, is not that unbelievers need eternal life, but that they will spend their eternal life in the wrong place.

At this point, the response is generally that I do not understand what is meant by ‘life’ in the New Testament – it is much more than simply living, and refers to a tremendous quality of life. I am sure I do not understand all that is meant by the word ‘life’ in the New Testament. It certainly does include the idea of quality as well as quantity of life. But this objection completely misses the point.

By offering us eternal life, the New Testament writers are essentially saying: you already have life, but your life is limited – one day it will run out; but in Jesus you can have a new type of life, life which ‘lasts’ and ‘endures’, life which belongs to the new world, the new age which is coming.

6 John Polkinghorne, *The Way the World Is*, page 92

7 Okay, then – just a few. Matthew 19:16; Matthew 19:29; Matthew 25:46; Mark 10:17; Mark 10:30; Luke 10:25; Luke 18:18; Luke 18:30; John 3:15; John 3:16; John 3:36; John 4:14; Acts 13:46; Romans 2:7; 1 John 5:13; Jude 21; ...

This new life is described as eternal, unlimited. We are not offered ‘superior life’ or ‘better life’. Please hear what I am saying: I do believe that eternal life in Jesus *is* better than life without Jesus, but this is not the way the New Testament writers describe it. They offer eternal life, in contrast to life which must, inevitably, be not eternal.

There are lots of other differences between the two types of life, but this is the one term which is consistently used to distinguish between them. Why on earth would they use the word ‘eternal’ to distinguish between the two types of life if they believed that both types of life were eternal? It seems that belief in the traditional doctrine of Hell requires us to also believe the New Testament writers were completely incompetent in their use of language, or deliberately misleading us.

In many Biblical passages, ‘life’ means far more than just existing. But ‘death’ means the end of suffering: you may well suffer as you die, but once you are dead you feel neither pleasure nor pain. Almost all the references to suffering in the Bible (and there are a great many) are about this life. For example, Paul mentions suffering in a familiar passage in Romans.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:18, NASB)

There are a few exceptions in the Bible, where suffering does not seem to be limited to this present life, and I aim to consider them all. But the majority of references to suffering in the Bible are to suffering in this life, not the next.

Just to be clear: I am not trying to argue that we should interpret the ‘inconvenient’ passages according to what we ‘know’ the Bible teaches. I am saying that the vast majority of Biblical passages dealing with this subject are wonderfully, refreshingly clear and consistent. Our aim, therefore, is firstly to examine what the Bible actually says, in passage after passage; and then we can seek to understand what the very few less clear passages mean, in the light of the many clear passages.

As always, the starting point for understanding what each passage means must be: *what did the passage mean to the original hearers?* It may well mean more to us, but it seems unlikely that the meaning God wants us to take from the passage today will contradict the meaning it had for the original hearers.

If you want me to believe the Bible teaches that ordinary human beings can be dead *and* feel either pleasure or pain, then just show me where it does this. And no, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is not teaching us about the nature of the afterlife. We will consider the passage in detail in section 6.e, ‘*The rich man and Lazarus*’.

There are many passages in the New Testament that tell us about ‘life’ and ‘eternal life’. Is there a single passage that qualifies the meaning of ‘life’, to turn it into something that will fit the doctrine of eternal torment? Is there a single passage which explains we are not supposed to understand ‘life’ to mean what it ordinarily, obviously means, and explains that it really means something radically different when the New Testament writers use the term? No, not one.

1.h. The meaning of 'eternal'

We have looked at the 'life' bit of 'eternal life' – what about the 'eternal' bit? Here, too, we need to be very careful to understand the Biblical language, because the Biblical writers are often saying something quite different from the English word 'eternal'.

The good news is that, in many places, the question is fairly academic: when God declares, "As surely as I live for ever," (Deuteronomy 32:40) we can be pretty confident that 'for ever' means exactly what we think it means: infinite duration.

But there are many places in the Bible where 'for ever', 'eternal' or 'everlasting' do not mean what we expect (a few examples follow shortly). We think they refer to *duration* – to time that will never end – but very often they actually refer to *purpose*. 'Never fail' would often be a more accurate translation than 'never end'.

You may be concerned at this point – worried I am suggesting that Jesus offers us eternal life, but this eternal life does not necessarily last for ever? Please don't worry: when you are considering life, then life which never fails is just as good as life which never ends. In fact, it is better: we probably all know people who are still alive but not really living – life which is endlessly prolonged can turn into a nightmare – but life which never fails is constantly renewed, fresh and vigorous. This is the sort of life Jesus offers us, as we see in John 7:37-38.

But however we understand eternal life, the main point is simple and straightforward. Jesus came to offer us eternal life as an alternative to perishing; He did not come to offer us pleasure instead of pain. He offers us life, not pleasure; the precise duration of that life is really not that important in understanding His words.

So, back to the question of eternity. Let us look at a few examples. A good place to start is in Jonah 2:6.

To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.

In this case, 'forever' lasted just three days and three nights!

Similarly, God's promise to keep a descendant of David on the throne of Israel 'forever' (2 Samuel 7:13) lasted more like 400 years, after which the Kings (such as Herod) were not descended from David. Even today, Israel has no King; although, to be fair, David does have a descendant on the throne in Heaven, which is probably better.

The threat to Eli that God will 'judge his family for ever' (1 Samuel 3:13) does *not* refer to a Heavenly court case that goes on interminably, but to a punishment for their sins that is finite (the boys die), but the consequences of which will last for ever. This judgement is consistent with conditional immortality and offers no support for the idea of eternal torment.

We are told in Jude 7 that Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example to us "by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." – literally, a 'vengeance of eternal fire'. For anyone who thinks this is unclear: *Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning!* The fire lasted for as long as it took to complete the job. That's as long as any fire needs to

burn for.

The Psalmist tells us, talking about the sun, moon and stars,
 He set them in place for ever and ever;
 he gave a decree that will never pass away. (Psalm 148:6)

Despite this assurance, the scientists tell us that the sun and stars will not always remain – in a few billion years, they will have burned out and disappeared.

Even if you do not believe the scientists, the Bible itself teaches us that the sun will pass away. We read that there will be no more sun (Revelation 22:5), and that the first heaven and the first earth will pass away (Revelation 21:1). But the sun, moon and stars will last for as long as they are needed.

There are many other examples. Naaman's leprosy will cling to Gehazi and his descendants "forever" (2 Kings 5:27). We don't know how long this punishment is (was?) to last for, but it is hard to imagine his leprous descendants inhabiting the New Jerusalem for all time.

Finally, in reference to Samuel, "always" (1 Samuel 1:22) means 'for his whole life'. You have to interpret these terms in their context.

This is a really important point. We can rely on the Bible as God's revelation to us. But, in the Bible, we have been given a collection of meaningful documents – not a collection of individual verses which were intended to stand alone out of context.

As we look at what the Bible teaches about the fate of the unsaved, and as we consider the key passages, we need to look at both the context of the passage and the meanings of the words used if we are to understand those passages correctly.

Some Christians try to defend taking Biblical material out of context by the use of phrases such as: "The Bible says it, so I believe it." But you cannot consistently claim that the Bible *says* things that it does not *mean*; if we are to discover what it actually means, we have to interpret each passage in context, and in the light of what we are told in the rest of the Bible: any serious book on hermeneutics (the study of how to interpret the Bible) will confirm this.⁸

One simple and obvious example of this can be seen in Acts 23:12-13. In verse 12, we read that 'the Jews' formed a plot to kill Paul. Out of context, this has a clear meaning: the entire Jewish nation joined in a plot to kill Paul. But common sense tells us that this is absurd, and verse 13 clarifies the meaning by informing us that there were 'more than forty' people in the plot. So it was not the whole Jewish nation, only a little more than forty individuals. In context, the meaning is clear; if you take the text out of context, you cannot understand it correctly.

So: you have to interpret passages in context, and you can't just assume that when the Biblical writers use terms like "for ever" and "eternal" they are talking about unlimited time.

God does not threaten us with eternal torment: I want you to be clear about this point. But – given the actual meaning of the words in the original languages – even if the Bible did threaten eternal torment, it is probable that any such torment would be

8 A good example would be Fee and Stuart, *How to read the Bible for all its worth*.

completed at some point and cease. We will return to this point several times.

2. The Short Version

I am sometimes asked if there is any Biblical evidence to support this strange idea that the unsaved will cease to exist. The questioner always assumes that the Bible clearly teaches about eternal torment, and that people like me only believe in destruction because we ignore the Biblical evidence and choose instead to indulge in wishful thinking.

In fact, the situation is precisely the opposite. Jesus tells us quite clearly that the wicked will be destroyed, and this message can be found all the way through the Bible; the Biblical justification for belief in eternal torment rests on one possible interpretation of a single text (Revelation 14:9-11) whose meaning is far from clear.

We shall, of course, consider that passage in some detail. You can find the discussion in section 7.b, 'Smoke of torment', but we have some ground to cover first: we need to establish that the Bible clearly teaches that the wicked will be destroyed.

Most evangelicals find this hard to believe, because they are so used to reading the Bible in the light of their belief in eternal torment. We will go into more detail in Part Two, but we can get a good understanding of what the Bible actually says by looking at a few familiar passages.

2.a. *God so loved the world*

Let us begin by considering the best known verse in the Bible.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

What Jesus actually says seems to be pretty clear. You have two choices: if you do not believe in Jesus, you will perish; if you believe in Jesus, you will gain eternal life. You can perish – which means to die or be destroyed – or you can live eternally. Through Jesus, you have the choice.

You may well have heard a great deal about eternal life. Christians – justifiably! – talk about it a lot. You may be less familiar with the alternative Jesus offers here. The word translated 'perish' (*apolētai* in the Greek) comes from *apollumi*. The meaning is: to destroy or destroy utterly, with the implication of permanent, absolute destruction; to die, with the implication of ruin and destruction. It is a very strong and clear term. The alternative to eternal life is not pain; it is not an uncertain unpleasant future: the alternative to receiving eternal life, according to Jesus, is to be utterly destroyed.

What Jesus is saying here makes sense. At least, it makes sense if you assume He means what he says. But if you believe in eternal torment, understanding this passage becomes much more difficult.

Many Christians believe that Jesus offers us eternal life as an alternative to eternal torment, but Jesus actually says that eternal life is an alternative to destruction. If

eternal torment is true, then what Jesus should have said, if He were being honest with us, is more like this.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not suffer eternal torment, but have eternal pleasure.

Or am I missing something?

I know we talked earlier about the possibility that Jesus doesn't need to explicitly state the threat of eternal torment because we all know it is there, hanging in the background. But Jesus is not leaving the unspoken threat hanging in the air here: He explicitly states the alternative. If you believe in Him, you will not perish; instead, you will receive eternal life.

In the end, the one vital question we have to ask is: can we believe what He is saying here? Is Jesus telling us the truth?

You can understand this whole book as a response to the simple question: *does Jesus mean what He says in this passage?* I hope that, by the time we finish, you will be able to give a clear, confident, resounding "Yes!" to this question.

At this point in the conversation, people who believe in eternal torment generally ignore the difficult question of whether Jesus is misleading us, and instead explain that I don't understand what Jesus means by the term 'eternal life'. After all, if we can't find eternal torment in the threatened destruction, perhaps we can find it as the opposite of the promised eternal life?

Unfortunately for these believers, there is a well-known passage later in the same gospel, which explains exactly what Jesus means when He talks about eternal life. When Jesus is praying, He says:

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

What is eternal life, according to Jesus? It is to know God. He does not say that eternal life is to be rescued from the flames; He does not say that eternal life is to enjoy eternal bliss or to avoid eternal torment. Eternal life is to know God, to know Him personally, to be in a relationship with Him and to be in relationship with Jesus Christ. That sounds good to me. And it sounds nothing like the doctrine of eternal torment.

The doctrine of eternal torment turns John 3:16 completely on its head. In this verse, Jesus *says* He offers us eternal life as an alternative to perishing; but (if this doctrine is true!) what he really *intended* to say is rather different.

- We don't need to be given eternal life because we already have it.
- We don't need to worry about perishing because we can't.
- We need to believe in Him in order to have a good time.
- If we do not believe in Him, the punishment is eternal torment.

Was Jesus *really* that bad a communicator?

If the doctrine of eternal torment is true, then we need to explain why John 3:16 is so misleading. We have just talked about the difference between what Jesus actually

said and what He intended to say – assuming that eternal torment is true and that He was trying to teach us the truth about our eternal destiny. But, to be fair, if eternal torment is true, there are other possible ways to understand what is going on.

It seems to me that, if eternal torment is true, there are only four possible explanations of Jesus' words.

- Jesus was wrong in His understanding of what happens after death.
- Jesus was right in His understanding, but wanted to mislead us.
- Jesus was right in His understanding, and wanted to tell us the truth, but was incapable of communicating what He believed.
- Jesus was right in His understanding, told the truth and communicated it clearly, but the Gospel writers decided to cut out the nasty bits and change His teaching; they made up John 3:16, presumably so that Jesus would come across as a nicer person.

Personally, I find each one of these explanations unacceptable. But my feelings are not important here. If you believe in the doctrine of eternal torment, how do *you* explain the difference between the truth (as you see it) and what Jesus actually says? Which of these possible explanations do you choose? Of course, you may choose to reject them all; if you can find another option, I would like to hear it.

I refuse to distort Jesus' clear teaching about this subject. But then, it seems to me there is no need to: we can understand His words as meaning exactly what they appear to say. A straightforward, natural, obvious, common-sense reading of this text is entirely consistent with the teaching we find in the rest of the Bible. We can take Jesus at His word without creating any theological problems for ourselves.

The New Testament is pretty clear on this subject – eternal life is something we do not naturally and automatically have as human beings: it is something given to us by God when we believe in Jesus Christ. We do not *have* an immortal soul when we are born, but we can be *given* the free gift of eternal life, the mortal can be clothed with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:54).

2.b. The wages of sin

So the best known verse in the Bible shows that Jesus is clear about the choice we have. What about the *second* best known verse? This is probably the second best known verse in evangelical circles at least, and it used to feature frequently on public posters.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Things could not be much more straightforward, could they? The wages of sin – what you are entitled to because you have earned it – is death, not eternal survival in torment. The gift of God, something you don't already have, is eternal life. You are being offered a simple choice: you either take the gift of life and live, or you keep the wages of sin and die. You either live or perish, just as Jesus tells us.

If eternal torment were true, then Paul really should have told us the truth – he should have written something more like this:

For the wages of sin is eternal torment, but the gift of God is eternal pleasure in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Again, those who believe in eternal torment need to explain why this passage is so misleading. If you believe in eternal torment, is Paul deliberately misleading us, or simply incapable of expressing himself clearly?

So both Jesus and Paul offer us life; for Jesus, the alternative is that we perish, for Paul the alternative is that we die. There seems to be a fairly coherent theme emerging here.

I don't know about you, but if I discover that both Jesus and Paul teach something very clearly, then I tend to think that it is probably true, and might well be important.

2.c. The reality of Hell

You may note that the idea of eternal torment is completely missing from both these key passages. If eternal torment is such an important doctrine, how do we explain the fact that it is not mentioned in these key passages dealing with the question of what happens after death?

(More importantly, how do we explain the fact that the doctrine of eternal torment never gets mentioned in *any* passage dealing with what happens to people after death?)

For some people, the lack of reference to torment – to Hell, as we know it – in many key passages supports the idea that maybe there is no Hell. Maybe the destruction being spoken of is only destruction of the dark and destructive parts of our lives, and we all end up in Heaven?

There are two basic responses to this idea. One is to note all the Biblical passages on the subject (many of which we consider below): you can work through each one and check whether it is consistent with the idea that everyone goes to Heaven in the end.

The other response operates more at the gut level. God is love (1 John 4:16): He loves us and invites us to return His love. But love must be freely given. There must be an alternative to Heaven – we have been given the opportunity to freely respond to God's love, so we must have the opportunity to freely reject it.

A God who tells us, "I love you so much, you will spend all eternity with me, whether you want to or not" – this is not the God of the Bible. It is more like a villain in a Victorian melodrama, intent on kidnapping and imprisoning the heroine.

The Bible talks about Hell, so we have to take it seriously. But Hell must be consistent with God's character and with the Bible's teaching about what happens to us after death. So which understanding is consistent with God's character and the Bible's teaching? Is it a Hell of eternal torment, because God hates sinners and wants them to suffer? Or is it a Hell in which the people who finally reject Him are destroyed because He loves everyone, because He wants us to freely choose to respond to His love, and because He wants the people who reject Him to suffer as little as possible?

2.d. Sodom and Gomorrah

When you think about God punishing people with fire, the one clear Biblical example is Sodom and Gomorrah. The full story can be found in chapters 18 and 19 of Genesis, but for our purposes just three verses are probably sufficient. Firstly, we read about the punishment.

Then the Lord rained down burning sulphur on Sodom and Gomorrah – from the Lord out of the heavens. (Genesis 19:24)

We have already noted that these cities are no longer burning, so the ‘eternal’ part of eternal torment finds little support in this passage. What is even more interesting, in this key story about God punishing the wicked, is that *there is no reference to suffering*. The idea of torment is completely missing.

Lot’s wife is turned to a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). Does she suffer? Possibly. But, if so, we are not told: it is not important to the story. The people of the cities are all killed, apart from Lot and his family – burned up in the fire from heaven. I assume this hurt, possibly very badly, for a short time. But the passage says nothing about their pain and suffering.

In my imagination, the inhabitants of the city are running around in agony, trying to escape the fire. It seems that the people who perished in Pompeii (which may have been a fairly similar event) suffered very briefly, so maybe they would not have had much time to run around. But I don’t think you are interested in my imagination: the question is – what does the text actually say? And what we read is that God punished the sin of the people by destroying their city and all the people in it. The Bible *does say* they were destroyed; the Bible *does not say* that anybody was hurt – caused pain – in the process. Maybe they suffered, or maybe they were burned up instantly: we are not told.

I’m not claiming that nobody was hurt – the Bible does not tell us that, either. I still think it is likely that people suffered in the destruction of the city. But you cannot use this passage as evidence that the Bible teaches us God punishes sin by inflicting pain on people, when the passage says nothing about pain.

Of course, in a sense, all punishment involves inflicting suffering: if it is not unpleasant, it is not really punishment. But there are many forms of punishment, and we generally distinguish very clearly between isolation (being sent to your room), denial of pleasure (no sweets for a week) and pain (smacking). In the Bible, we find our Heavenly Father, like any loving parent, constantly telling us how to have a joyful and fulfilled life and how to avoid suffering.

So the absence of any reference to suffering in this passage may be part of the message God is giving us here: He will punish us when necessary, but even in our punishment He has no desire to cause us pain.

The second passage takes us to the morning after the destruction.

Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the Lord. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace. (Genesis 19:27-28)

After the destruction is complete, Abraham goes to see what happened. He sees the smoke rising up from the ashes. This serves as a testament to the destruction which has taken place. God is no longer raining down fire, the city and the people in it are no longer being destroyed, whatever pain the inhabitants suffered has ceased hours ago, but the smoke remains.

The smoke sends a message to anyone who looks at this scene. If we come across the ruins of a castle or other old building, we will probably try to imagine how splendid it used to be – we often find ruins are a beautiful and poetic sight. But if we come across ruins with smoke rising from them, we will immediately think of the destruction which has taken place: it is not beautiful and poetic, it is a site of violence and destruction where people probably died horribly. The smoke reminds us of what has happened.

This detail, the smoke rising from a scene of destruction, not only tells Abraham what has happened, it also serves as a reference point: remember this, you are going to meet it again.

The smoke rising from a destroyed city functions like the charcoal fire in John's gospel. We come across a charcoal fire only twice in the New Testament: once in John 18:18 when Peter betrays Jesus three times, and once in John 21:9 when Peter affirms his love for Jesus three times. The appearance of the fire links these two passages, just in case we miss the significance of Peter making three affirmations about Jesus in each place.

In a similar way, rising smoke links several passages in Revelation, and links them back to this one.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is important, not just because it is the only Biblical account of punishment by fire (or, perhaps, the only Biblical account *to date*, depending on how you interpret Revelation): it also establishes the pattern for how God punishes the wicked.

if he [God] condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; (2 Peter 2:6)

The context is that Peter is assuring us: if God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah but spared Lot, then He knows how to rescue godly men from trials.

In making his point, Peter refers to Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly. He is not *telling* his readers that the cities are an example, he is *using* the example of the cities to make his main point. Peter expects that the people he is writing to already understand Sodom and Gomorrah to be an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.

So the belief that Sodom and Gomorrah provide us with an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly is part of the culture, part of the belief system of Peter's day; Peter refers to this belief and by using it to establish his main point, he confirms it.

And the Biblical example of what is going to happen to the ungodly is a very short act of destruction, involving no recorded pain or suffering. Which is entirely

consistent with the teaching of Jesus and of Paul, but entirely inconsistent with the doctrine of eternal torment.

2.e. *Weeping and gnashing of teeth*

We should briefly touch on one phrase – “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” – which appears seven times in the New Testament: Matthew 8:12, Matthew 13:42, Matthew 13:50, Matthew 22:13, Matthew 24:51, Matthew 25:30 and Luke 13:28. Each time the phrase is used, it refers to the experience of the wicked in the future life.

‘Weeping’ clearly refers to sorrow, but what does ‘gnashing of teeth’ refer to?

Many people assume that the gnashing of teeth refers to pain because the people are in Hell and Hell is a place of torment. But take these assumptions away for a moment, and the picture changes. Elsewhere in the Bible, gnashing of teeth refers (with one possible exception) to anger, not pain.

The core meaning of the Greek verb *brycho* refers to the act of eating noisily or greedily. It is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *haraq* and refers to the gnashing of teeth as an expression of anger – it is used, for example, in Job 16:9. The noun is used in Proverbs 19:12 to refer to the wrath of a king.

In the New Testament, the verb is used only once, Acts 7:54, where it refers to the anger of those listening to Stephen’s speech: “they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.” And the noun is used just seven times: always, as we have noted, in the phrase, “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”. In all these passages, it refers to anger: there is no Biblical (or any other) evidence to suggest it means anything different in any of these passages.

For the sake of accuracy: it is possible that there is one passage in the Bible where gnashing of teeth does not indicate anger, wrath or rage. In Lamentations 2:16, it may express mocking. It clearly does not express pain.

After healing the Centurion’s servant, Jesus praises his faith.

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8:11-12)

Jesus is telling the Jews that many, like the Centurion, will come from outside the nation of Israel and enjoy the blessing of feasting with Abraham, while (we assume, many of) those in Israel will be excluded from the feast: they will be thrown outside the well-lit feasting hall and into the darkness.

The feast is an image of blessing, not of salvation as we normally understand it; Jesus is talking about the afterlife, but He is not talking about eternal destiny here. Jesus is warning the Jews they will miss out on the blessing God wants them to have, the joy and fellowship of the feast, unless they recognise and respond to Him the way the Centurion has.

The outer darkness is a place of exclusion from blessing, not of torment. And this

exactly fits the response of those who have been excluded: weeping and gnashing of teeth indicates sorrow and anger. Sorrow and anger describes how people react when they discover they are being denied something desirable which they thought they had by right; it also describes how people react when they realise how much their own stupidity or selfishness has cost them. In the first case, the anger would be directed at God; in the second, at themselves. Either way, sorrow and anger fit the picture Jesus gives us here; sorrow and pain do not.

In Matthew 13:36-43, the phrase is used in the context of Jesus explaining the Parable of the Weeds. At harvest time, the weeds are pulled up and burned – that is what you do to weeds. The function of the fire is to destroy the weeds, not to cause them pain. In the same way, at the end of the age the angels will remove from the kingdom all who do evil: they too will be destroyed, but not before they have been given time to recognise their exclusion from the kingdom. Like those who are excluded from the feast, they react with sorrow and anger.

In some of these passages (such as Matthew 13:42 and Matthew 13:50), the people who are weeping and gnashing teeth are consigned to the furnace, and in others (such as Matthew 8:12 and Matthew 22:13) they are consigned to the outer darkness. But the sorrow and anger are described in the same way in each case. If we were being told that the furnace causes pain which leads to gnashing of teeth, then the response would be different when the exclusion is ‘only’ to the outer darkness and no fire is involved. But that is not what the Bible says.

In each of these passages, the person or people excluded from fellowship and blessing reacts with sorrow and anger. The anger may be directed at the One excluding them from blessing, but it is more reasonably directed at themselves; it may, of course, be both.

So there is suffering, but it is reasonable to see it as an inevitable consequence of people recognising the consequences of their actions: there is no suggestion in any of these passages that God has chosen to make them suffer, and no threat that any suffering will be eternal in duration.

2.f. Taking stock

We have reached the end of Part One and have, I hope, covered all the key aspects of the Bible’s teaching about Hell.

- We are not created with immortal souls: we are created with souls which have the potential to become immortal.
- God loves us and wants us to enjoy eternal life, living in fellowship with Him; but if we reject His offer of eternal life, then we will perish.
- Our punishment for rejecting eternal life is that we get what we have chosen. The consequence God warns us about, and the punishment we will receive if we continue to reject Him, is destruction, not pain.
- This punishment is eternal, because the destruction is for all eternity.
- Fire is often associated with the destruction, but God never threatens us with fire as a means of inflicting pain. Destruction may hurt, but any pain being suffered is probably to do with regret for lost opportunities; it is not

something deliberately inflicted by a loving God.

- If there is pain, it is short lived, and what remains after the destruction is only smoke rising up as a reminder, to those who survive, of the destruction which has taken place.

You may, like many people at this point in the conversation, be half convinced. You can see that various passages seem to teach destruction rather than suffering, but you probably suspect there are other passages which teach the opposite. After all, the doctrine of eternal torment must have some Biblical justification, mustn't it?

For a long time, mainstream Christian teaching has ignored what the the Biblical writers actually say about this subject. As a result, most Christians, when they first hear this teaching, assume that these ideas must be wrong. They are convinced that the Bible must teach, somewhere, what they have been brought up to believe.

So my aim in Part Two ('The Gory Details') is to address those concerns; as an added bonus, I also try to provide a little insight into how some familiar passages take on a new meaning when we read them in a new light, free from the threat of eternal torment.

Part Two: The Gory Details

3. Old Testament Evidence for Destruction

Part Two takes you on a comprehensive survey of both the Old and New Testaments, working through a large enough selection of passages to demonstrate the essential consistency of the Bible's teaching on this matter; and also considering in detail all the texts which are used to support the traditional doctrine.

In my experience, it is rarely sufficient to show people what the Bible actually says about this subject: we have to work through every significant passage in order to demonstrate that this is not a strange 'new' teaching, it is not a perverse interpretation of a few texts, but the clear and consistent message of the whole Bible, a doctrine held by the Jesus and the earliest Christian writers, and by the Old Testament writers before them..

I am not attempting to deal with every mention of the afterlife in the Bible, but I do aim to be exhaustive enough to settle any remaining doubt about what the Bible teaches. Many people have a substantial investment in believing the traditional doctrine, and any significant passage which is left out becomes an easy target for people who are looking for reasons to hold on to the traditional view: "Of course, the author has failed to address ..."

You may find, part-way through Part Two, that it has done its job, and you are convinced about the essential consistency of the Bible's teaching about Hell. In that case, if you find the material is getting a little repetitive, do feel free to skim over the remainder of this section. I suggest you do not skip it completely: you may well find that some of this material is interesting and helpful even when you are comfortable with the basic message – some familiar passages take on new meaning when they are viewed from a different perspective. In any case, I hope you rejoin me for the (much shorter!) Part Three.

In these next five chapters, we will look at what the Biblical writers tell us about the fate of the wicked, starting first in the Old Testament and then moving on to the New.

We have already seen that Jesus teaches that the unsaved will perish. On this point, He is simply repeating the clear teaching of the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament, the destruction of the ungodly is clearly and consistently taught. To demonstrate this, let us look at a few passages.

3.a. In the beginning

Right at the beginning, when God spoke to Adam in the Garden of Eden, the consequence of sin was made clear.

but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die. (Genesis 2:17)

If the consequence of sin is destruction, God's warning makes perfect sense. When you die, you cease to exist. The threat He makes communicates this penalty clearly and accurately.

On the other hand, if the consequence of sin is eternal torment, God was not being entirely straight with poor old Adam – in fact, He was really being quite economical with the truth. If you think our eternal destiny matters (and why are you reading this if you don't?) then surely God should have let Adam know the full consequences of any possible disobedience?

At this pivotal point in history, Adam is told he has two options. He can choose life, or he can choose death. It's amazingly close to John 3:16 – you can choose life or you can perish. Of course, you can, if you wish, believe that what this *really* means is that Adam had to choose between an eternity of pleasure and an eternity of pain – but that is not what the Bible actually says.

When discussing this passage, many people point out that the death referred to in this verse is spiritual, not physical: Adam was separated from God when he sinned (which is what we call 'spiritual death'), but he did not die physically for many years. It can be argued that the penalty was both spiritual and physical: there was death both immediately and some years later.

Looking at the passage from this perspective reinforces the point we are making. While there is a sense in which God's word was fulfilled, there is also a sense in which He was more gracious to Adam than Adam had any right to expect. I think we see this aspect of God's character being expressed in many other occasions in the rest of the Bible.

But this passage only reveals a God Who is gracious to us if we are supposed to understand the text as it is given: death is the promise, and death is the penalty: immediate, in a spiritual sense; and delayed, in a physical sense. If eternal torment is true, then death is the promise but eternal torment is the penalty. If eternal torment is true, God is not more gracious than Adam had any right to expect, but more cruel than Adam was led to expect.

3.b. After the fall

This next point is not as obvious as the last one, but I think it is still worth making.

After the fall, God says that Adam must die.

“He [Adam] must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden, to work the ground from which he had been taken. (Genesis 3:22-23)

The obvious question is: why?

If you believe that God is being wrathful and vengeful here, wanting Adam to suffer as much as possible as a consequence of his sin, then you can read this to say that God here is making sure that Adam will die so that he will go to Hell and suffer for all eternity. But the passage does not say this, and it is not consistent with the picture of God we see here.

On the other hand, if you believe that God still loves Adam and wants the best for him despite his sin, then this passage takes on a completely different meaning. Adam is now alienated from God, knowing what he has lost. Allowing Adam to live forever in this condition would be unnecessarily cruel, so God ensures that Adam will, one day, die, and be released from his guilt and regrets.

Of course, this picture only makes sense if death is the end of the story. To ‘release’ Adam from a life of regret to an eternity of unspeakable torment would not be a demonstration of love.

The basic question is: does God still love Adam, or is He wanting to get revenge on Adam and punish him as much as possible? And I am not asking about which option you or I would prefer, or which option fits our theology most neatly, but which option best fits the text.

Everything in the text, from their banishment to the provision of clothing to protect Adam and Eve from the storms and thorns they now have to cope with, suggests that God still loves Adam. Nothing suggests the contrary. So it seems clear from the text that God still loves Adam. Death, in this context, must surely be seen as a blessing and a release.

3.c. Blown away like chaff

Let us take another well-known text. The book of Psalms begins with a familiar passage.

Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked ...
He is like a tree planted by streams of water. (Psalm 1:1,3a)

In other words, the godly man will endure – will last, will live. By way of contrast, what is the fate of the ungodly?

Not so the wicked!

They are like the chaff
that the wind blows away. (Psalm 1:4)

The wicked will disappear. Of course, if you want to be pedantic, the chaff does not cease to exist when it is blown away – it is merely moved and spread across the countryside. But this is not a scientific paper on the conservation of mass, it is poetry. You hold chaff in your hands, and it is there; the wind blows, and it is gone.

The contrast is with the godly. The godly man will endure, will last. The wicked man will disappear – the wind will blow, and the wicked will be no more: they do not have permanence.

This sounds remarkably like the destruction of the wicked to me. The same image is used elsewhere in the Old Testament – as when Isaiah speaks about Jerusalem.

But your many enemies will become like fine dust, the ruthless hordes
like blown chaff. (Isaiah 29:5)

3.d. *Consumed like stubble*

Similar to the picture of chaff is the image of stubble being burnt away. In the Song of Moses, we hear about the Egyptian army:

You unleashed your burning anger;
it consumed them like stubble. (Exodus 15:7)

This picture is not just used of punishment which has already been delivered. Fire is also used in a description of the final judgement.

Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire. (Malachi 4:1)

We do not burn stubble in order to inflict pain; we do not do it in order to hurt or punish the stubble. We burn stubble in order to get rid of it; we also burn stubble, in part, to get rid of disease, weeds and pests, all of which continue to cause problems if we simply plough the stubble back into the ground, but this aspect of the activity does not seem to feature in the Biblical imagery. The point here is that God will treat the arrogant and evildoer in the same way that we treat the stubble in our fields.

3.e. *Their final destiny*

In Psalm 73, the Psalmist is wrestling with one aspect of the problem of evil: he looks at the world and sees that sin is not punished, the evil prosper.

This is what the wicked are like –
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. (Psalm 73:12)

It is not right, the Psalmist says: things should not be this way. The problem and the confusion remain until he receives Divine revelation.

When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply
till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny. (Psalm 73:16-17)

So the problem of the wicked prospering will not be solved in the here-and-now. The problem is only solved when you take into account their final destiny.

How suddenly they are destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!
As a dream when one awakes,
so when you arise O Lord,
you will despise them as fantasies. (Psalm 73:19-20)

The point is reinforced a few verses later:

Those who are far from you will perish;
You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. (Psalm 73:27)

This answer, the wicked being swept away and destroyed, is presented to us as a description of what happens after death. You *can* read it purely as a statement of what happens in this life, but reading the passage this way throws up a number of significant problems.

Firstly, as an answer to the problem of wicked people prospering, it just does not

work. You can see for yourself that many wicked people die rich and comfortable. That is why the Psalmist is unhappy in the first place! To claim that they all get destroyed *in this life* flies in the face of the evidence.

Secondly, it goes against the meaning of this passage. If you could see the wicked being destroyed, you would not need to ponder the problem of their success until you went into the sanctuary and had the answer revealed to you.

And thirdly, the fate of the wicked is contrasted with the fate of the godly. The Psalmist clearly looks at what happens to the godly person after death.

You guide me with your counsel,
and afterwards you will take me into glory (Psalm 73:24)

The parallel must be with the final destiny of the wicked after death, and the final destiny of the wicked after death is very clear: they are destroyed.

3.f. Like the idols

There are several passages in the Old Testament which describe the idols that men make. A typical example can be found later in the Psalms.

They have mouths but cannot speak,
eyes, but they cannot see;
they have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but they cannot smell;
they have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but they cannot walk;
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them. (Psalm 115:5-8)

You can take this to mean that those who make and trust idols will have hands but be unable to feel. So you could use this to argue for the continued existence of the ungodly – but if they can feel nothing, there is not a lot of point in tormenting them!

These passages are really saying that idols are nothing. They may look like something to the eye, they may appear to be something, but in reality they feel nothing, they do nothing, they are nothing.

Everyone seems to agree that the idols will not be writhing in torment for all eternity. And we are told that those who trust them will be like them. The conclusion seems inescapable: the people who will be like them will not be writhing in agony, either. This passage may not explicitly teach about destruction, but it is hard to see what other fate for the wicked would be consistent with the teaching here.

3.g. Death and destruction

In the Old Testament, Sheol ('the grave') is the place of the dead. It is sometimes translated as 'Hell' or 'death'. It is a shadowy place, where nothing much happens and nothing much can happen – certainly not torment. We have to wait until we reach the New Testament (in the next chapter) before the place of the dead starts to be associated with fire, but that does not prevent the fate of the ungodly being pictured sometimes in the Old Testament as destruction with fire.

(This may seem to be illogical, but associations do not work according to the rules of logic. You probably associate universities with learning, but you may well also associate university students with drinking: you know that university students go to university, but this does not mean that you associate universities with drinking. Associations are formed by stories and cultural connections, not by facts and logic.)

So it is interesting to see numerous passages where Sheol is paired up with 'destruction' – either as an equivalent term, or to provide a comprehensive set of options. For example:

Death is naked before God;
Destruction lies uncovered. (Job 26:6)

And:

Death and Destruction lie open before the Lord (Proverbs 15:11)

And:

Death and Destruction are never satisfied (Proverbs 27:20)

You can summarise the expectation of people in the Old Testament very simply: the godly will reside in Sheol, possibly awaiting a resurrection, while the ungodly are destroyed and have no hope at all of resurrection. The Old Testament talks about Death and Destruction; it never talks about Death and Torment.

3.h. And others in the Old Testament

There are many other passages in the Old Testament which give exactly the same message.

You destroy those who tell lies (Psalm 5:6)
Kiss the son, lest he be angry
and you be destroyed in your way (Psalm 2:12)

Remember that Psalm 2 is quoted in the New Testament as referring to Jesus.

For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even the memory of them is forgotten.
Their love, their hate
and their jealousy have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that lies under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6)

And then there is the famous passage which, in many of our churches, we read every Christmas:

Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9:5)

A few verses later, Isaiah returns to the theme of burning:

By the wrath of the Lord Almighty
the land will be scorched

and the people will be fuel for the fire;
no-one will spare his brother. (Isaiah 9:19)

We have quite a bit of burning here, but note that the burning all takes place in this world: there is no suggestion that the burning in this world somehow continues into the next.

The boots, the garments and the people will all be fuel for the fire. Fuel is burned up: it is destroyed in the process. So what of the people? In the total absence of any suggestion to the contrary, we have to understand that they too will be burned up, destroyed in the process.

Being burned may hurt terribly if the victim is alive, but soon they die, soon they are consumed, and all suffering ceases. However, there is no suggestion in this passage that the people being burned will be alive at the time. The context is a battle, and you burn the corpses left on the battlefield to prevent the stench and the disease which come when you leave dead bodies to rot.

After a battle, you tend to the wounded. Those you can help, you take away for treatment; those you cannot help, you put out of their misery. The bodies of a few important people might be taken away, but the majority would be burned. You burn them because it is easier than burying them and because they do not deserve a decent burial (or you are not able to provide them with one), not to make them suffer.

3.i. What the Old Testament doesn't say

There is one final aspect of the Old Testament record to be considered: what it doesn't say. I know an argument from silence is tricky, but in the present context this seems to strongly support the interpretation I'm putting forward here.

My point here is not so much that the idea of people being tormented in Hell is absent from the Old Testament, but that it is absent *even from the places where you would expect it to be*.

Take Psalm 109:6-20 for example. These verses contain an impressive set of curses. David seems to have spent a great deal of time crafting a comprehensive list: this is not thoughtless or off-the-cuff verbal abuse.

Amongst other things, David curses his enemy's wife, his children, his belongings and his memory – and yet the one obvious curse is left unspoken. The one thing David does not say is: “May he burn in Hell.” Is that because he is carefully considering which curses would be appropriate? Is he moderating his language because he considers this to be a step too far? Read the Psalm. I really don't think that is the case. David is not holding back here.

The obvious – the only – reason is that being tormented after you die was not something which David considered to be possible. He doesn't even hope that it might happen. This essential piece of mainstream evangelical theology is totally absent from David's thinking.

4. NT Evidence for Destruction by Fire

4.a. *Burning in the New Testament*

In the Old Testament, the fate of the wicked is usually described as ‘destruction’. In the New Testament, the doctrine is unchanged, but the language is slightly different. When talking about the fate of the wicked, the central image in the New Testament is that of fire. As we have already seen, this image is present in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament it comes to the foreground.

We have to be very careful at this point. People are so used to the idea of ‘hell-fire’ that it becomes very difficult to read these passages for what they say. Please excuse me if I seem to labour this point, but it really is essential; experience suggests that we have to go slowly here.

Imagine you have a photograph you want to get rid of – perhaps it shows a lover who cheated and left you. You could just throw it in the bin, but you would know it was still out there. No, the most satisfying option is to burn it. That way, you destroy the photograph. It cannot come back and haunt you – and hopefully, neither will the person concerned.

You burn the photograph to get rid of it. You do it to be free, not to inflict pain on the photograph or on the other person – however much you may want to inflict pain on them! Remember the quote from Malachi.

Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire. (Malachi 4:1)

The evildoers will be like stubble, and the day of the Lord will set the stubble on fire. You do not burn stubble in order to inflict pain on it; you don’t burn it as a punishment – you burn it to get rid of it.

In the Bible, fire has various functions: it produces light; it cooks food, cleanses and purifies (by heat); and it destroys. Of course, fire can hurt – but that is a side effect, not the main function. So what do you burn, and why? When you think about it, all the different functions boil down to just two basic situations.

- You burn rubbish to get rid of it.
- You burn fuel to produce heat or light.

The heat of a fire can have many uses, but the purpose of a fire is always clear from the context. You burn the boots (Isaiah 9:5), the corpses (Isaiah 9:19) and the stubble (Malachi 4:1) to dispose of them. You burn fuel to warm you on a cold night (John 18:18), cook your food (1 Kings 19:21) and refine your gold (1 Peter 1:7). Of course, we know that evil people can use the heat of a fire to hurt others, but is there any evidence in the Bible that our loving Heavenly Father does this? No.

Of course, fire is not always deliberate: a fire in a forest or a town can cause death and destruction, pain and suffering. But the suffering is always limited; and, in any case, the fire of Hell is not accidental.

We have already noted that references to ‘eternal fire’ are not about fire which never ends, but fire which never fails, fire which fully completes its work: Sodom and Gomorrah “undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7) are not still burning but they were completely destroyed.

There are just a few passages in the Bible which talk – or seem to talk – about fire being used in other ways, and we will consider each one in turn.

4.b. Examples of burning

Many passages in the New Testament contain references to fire and burning. Let us start in Matthew’s gospel with John the Baptist.

The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:10, with a parallel in Luke 3:9)

The fire is not a punishment: it does not teach the tree a lesson; it does not serve as a warning to the other trees. A tree that does not bear good fruit is rubbish – it has failed to fulfil its purpose – and so it is disposed of. The dreadful news is that the same fate awaits the ungodly.

John goes on to repeat the point. After telling his hearers that the Messiah will baptise them with “the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11), he goes on to say that the Messiah

will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:12)

The point is surely clear: the chaff is not being punished or tormented. The useful stuff – the wheat – is carefully gathered and safely stored; the rubbish is disposed of – completely disposed of. The unquenchable fire will get rid of every bit of chaff. Everything that is not good and productive will go.

We find the same message in the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30). The fate of the weeds is to be burned. Jesus goes on to explain the parable.

As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:40-42)

As we have noted above, weeping and gnashing of teeth indicates sorrow and anger, not suffering; sorrow and anger are not pleasant, but there is no suggestion that this will last for all eternity. On the contrary, the parable tells us that “all who do evil” will be burned up and disappear, just like weeds are burned to get rid of them.

In the parable of the net, a few verses later, Jesus gives us the same message.

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it

up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:47-50)

In this case, you only throw the bad fish away, but the application is the same: the wicked are thrown into the blazing furnace. You get rid of the rubbish, one way or another: the fire is simply the means of rubbish disposal.

The message is consistent: you burn the stuff you don't want in order to get rid of it; those who are excluded and face destruction will know what is happening and will not be happy about it.

4.c. Believers and fire

Fire is used to get rid of the rubbish, but the New Testament does not only apply this to unbelievers. At times, it seems that the burning of rubbish is presented as a threat to believers as well: is this a threat to believers, that if we do not behave ourselves, we too may end up perishing in the fire? In my experience, a large number of Christians fear that this may be the case, but rarely admit to it.

This is the ancient dispute about 'eternal security' or, to use the old Calvinist terminology, 'perseverance of the saints'. I believe the issue arises, at least in part, from a superficial understanding of the nature of salvation: in particular, from a failure to distinguish between salvation as an event and salvation as a process – a topic we briefly consider in Appendix 2, 'Salvation'.

It seems likely that the promise that fire will destroy the rubbish will apply not only to the people who refuse to be a part of God's new Kingdom, but also to the parts of us which are not submitted to God's will. Paul explains this while talking about his ministry and the consequences of following Jesus.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

The builder (the individual building on the foundation of Jesus Christ) will be saved and the part of their life which has value – the loving, Jesus-centred part – will endure into the new world, but the rest of their life will be burned up and completely lost. So it matters how we build; or, to use Paul's language, it matters what we build our life with.

The same idea is found in John's gospel, where Jesus talks about the fate of those who do not remain in Him.

If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away

and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.
(John 15:6)

The word translated ‘remain’ (*meno* in the Greek) has a range of meanings: remain, tarry, abide, stay, dwell, wait, await, wait for, continue, endure, persevere, last, live. So this verse could be talking about the fate of a non-believer who does not live in Jesus, or it could be talking about the fruit produced by a believer who is not currently living in Jesus – the wood, hay and straw Paul talks about. In context, it is much more likely to be the latter, as this section of the discourse (John 15:1-8) is all about the disciples bearing fruit.

If we are not living in Jesus, we cannot bear fruit that will last (John 15:16) – the gold, silver and costly stones Paul talks about. Any part of our life that is not built on Jesus, any part of our life that He does not inhabit, and anything we achieve outside of Jesus, it is all futile, it will all be burned up. Only that which draws its life from Jesus will remain after the fire has tested our work.

But while the focus is on the believers bearing fruit, the truth of this passage applies equally to non-believers. Jesus is telling us here that what happens in the spiritual realm is like a process we all recognise in the material or physical realm: just as a branch (in the material realm) which is not connected to the vine will wither and die, so too (in the spiritual realm) anyone who is not connected to Jesus will wither and die. And as, in the physical realm, “such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned,” so too in the spiritual realm, these withered, dead people will be gathered up and disposed of.

So, while this passage is primarily talking about the fruit of those who follow Him, rather than the fate of those who do not follow Him, the message is again both straightforward and familiar. The fire is not a warning or a punishment, it is simply what you use to clear away the rubbish. The branch is already dead: it withered because it did not remain in Jesus, the only source of true life.

The role of fire yet again is simple, clear and consistent with the rest of Scripture. There is no mention of punishment or suffering; fire is used to clear away the rubbish.

4.d. *Fire and justice*

A parable is a story with a point, but it is not always obvious to the hearers. After Jesus tells the parable of the weeds in the field, the disciples ask Him to explain it (Matthew 13: 36). Right at the start of his explanation, Jesus clearly gives us the point of the story, the vital message He knows we need to hear:

As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. (Matthew 13:40)

But Jesus does not simply explain the parable here: He follows it up, firstly with the application, clearly spelled out; and then goes on to provide us with some additional teaching. It is important to understand what is going on here.

Firstly, the application.

The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. (Matthew 13:41)

This is no longer parable, but straightforward teaching given in simple and unambiguous terms. Just as we clear weeds from our garden and destroy them, so too the Son of Man will clear everything that causes sin and all who do evil from the world and destroy them.

Normally, Jesus finishes here: He tells the parable, and sometimes spells out the application for the disciples and for us. But on this occasion, He continues the subject with some further teaching which follows on from but is not present in the message of the parable.

They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear. (Matthew 13:42-43)

Why add this? We are not told explicitly but, from the context, the reason seems fairly clear.

Jesus is doing two things in this parable. Firstly, He re-affirms the clear teaching of the Old Testament (the wicked will be destroyed); secondly, He places Himself at the centre of the action: the Son of Man will send out His angels and they will do the weeding.

The vague promise of the Old Testament has been fleshed out and clarified. The Old Testament tells us the wicked will be destroyed, but this could easily be understood as a natural process – like a wild fire consuming the stubble remaining in the field, or like a corpse decaying and returning to the soil. By putting Himself at the centre of the story, Jesus is telling us that this is a process involving both people and purpose. It doesn't just naturally happen, like dead bodies naturally decay: it requires the Son of Man to give a command, and it requires the angels to act in obedience.

If people are involved, new questions arise. Wind and rain, fire and decay – they all just happen. We accept that things just happen. If you fall over and break a leg, it's sad but just one of those things. But if someone deliberately breaks your leg, that is something else entirely. We immediately start to ask questions about purpose and justice – because people are involved, and that changes the nature of the story.

This, I suggest, is what is happening here. It is one thing for the wicked to be destroyed like the chaff; it is another for someone to send out an order for angels to go and find the wicked, gather them up and destroy them. It is not an impersonal process, but a personal action. The obvious question raised by this parable in the hearts and minds of the people listening to Jesus is: where is the justice?

Justice is about more than just the wicked being punished – and more than the wicked being punished in an appropriate and proportionate way. We also need the people who are being punished to know that they are being punished, and why. This is why Jesus tells us about the sorrow and anger they will experience.

Sorrow and anger is the reaction we find when people are caught, when they are found out. The classic line, “And I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling kids”⁹ is always delivered in a tone of sorrow and anger, not in acceptance and resignation.

9 A quote from possibly every episode of the children's cartoon *Scooby Doo*.

These lines are always given as the villain is led away, knowing they are about to face justice. That is the situation, and the reaction, which Jesus is describing here. Justice is not only being done, but the people involved know it is being done.

In talking with people, I often find, somewhere around this point in the conversation, the person defending the doctrine of eternal torment tries to explain that when the Bible talks about fire in the context of eternal punishment, this fire is not literal, physical fire. It is a bit of a side-track, but if this detail matters to you, there is a discussion about it in Appendix 4, 'Some Further Details'.

4.e. The Day of the Lord

In real life, fire destroys; and it has the same function when the Bible talks explicitly about the Second Coming. The consistent message is that 'the day of the Lord' will come with fire. Three examples spring to mind, starting with the familiar passage from Malachi.

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them." (Malachi 4:1)

Paul is talking about Christians, not unbelievers, when he tells us about the use of fire in the 1 Corinthians passage we looked at above.

their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. (1 Corinthians 3:13)

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul assures his readers that God will pay back trouble to those who trouble and persecute them.

This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. (2 Thessalonians 1:7b)

And on the day He comes to be glorified:

He will punish those who do not know God and will not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9)

So, for these people, their punishment is destruction. That seems pretty clear. And, just to make it even clearer, the destruction is described as 'everlasting' – there is no hope of re-creation. No possibility of resurrection is offered. Once destroyed, forever destroyed.

As noted above, some people believe that the punishment of Hell consists of the people who are sent there suffering by being excluded from the presence of God and the pleasures of Heaven, rather than active torment. Paul supports this view, in a sense: those who do not know God and will not obey the gospel will be "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" so they will miss out on the joys of Heaven; but this is a necessary consequence of the promised destruction, not an alternative.

Paul repeats the message about destruction later in his letter to the Thessalonians,

just in case anyone failed to get the point first time round.

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming. (2 Thessalonians 2:8)

With the exception of two passages in Revelation (which we shall shortly be looking at), references in the New Testament to Hell fire are references to destruction, not to torment. So, in the New Testament, the vast majority of the passages that touch on this subject clearly point to destruction rather than torment being the fate of the wicked.

4.f. Passing through fire

We need to return to the 1 Corinthians passage again: the next few verses are also very significant.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple. (1 Corinthians 3:10-17)

The day of the Lord will come “with fire” (1 Corinthians 3:13) – but this fire will not judge us: it will test the quality of each man's (in context, each Christian's) work. If, in our lives, we have built nothing of any value, all our work will be burned up. Whatever remains after the fire – whatever survives into eternity – will be our reward.

This passage clearly teaches that a Christian who does not live right will be saved, but will “suffer loss” (1 Corinthians 3:15). In contrast, the local congregation (the plural ‘you’ of verse 16) is sacred: you are God's temple. And, we are told, “if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him” (1 Corinthians 3:17) – another situation where we are explicitly told that God's punishment is destruction, not suffering.

In this passage, the fire is something the Christian passes through, not the non-Christian. But the Christian's future is totally secure – the Christian will be saved, no matter what. The Christian's reward will depend on how he or she lived – it will be what remains, whatever has been built of gold, silver and precious stones.

The explicit fate of some unbelievers is that they will be destroyed. We are not told here about the fate of the unbelievers who do not commit the sin of destroying God's temple, but it is hard to see how the threat of eternal torment could fit in to the picture Paul is painting. If the doctrine of eternal torment is so important, why is it missing here?

Also: if we were to accept the idea that destruction is less of a threat to unbelievers than eternal torment, and if Paul believed most unbelievers were destined to suffer eternal torment, then the meaning of this text is turned upside-down. If you commit the sin of destroying God's temple, you yourself will be destroyed and escape the eternal flames. It seems very unlikely that Paul is telling the Corinthians if they commit a dreadful sin they will receive a lighter punishment!

But no, that is not what Paul is saying; the meaning of this passage is straightforward and unambiguous. Whatever the image or symbolism being used in any given passage, the teaching of the New Testament is simple and clear: the ungodly will perish.

5. Other NT Evidence for Destruction

5.a. *Broad is the way*

If we turn to the Sermon on the Mount, we find the same message from the mouth of Jesus. In another well-known passage, we read:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Yet again, the choice is very simple, and very clear: there are two ways. One leads to life, and the other leads to destruction. Not misery, not pain, not torment, but destruction.

5.b. *Great was the fall*

This same theme is picked up a few verses later, right at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus summarises the consequences of following His teaching – and the consequences of ignoring His teaching.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7:24-27)

I remember singing this story as a child: the wise man built his house upon the rock. The message is quite clear – if you hear and obey the words of Jesus, you will be like a man whose house stands when the inevitable storms come; if you do not obey His words, you will be like a man who builds a house which is doomed from the beginning.

This is not a parable. Jesus does not tell us about a man who built his house on the rock. Instead, He is talking to His followers – to you and me – and giving us a dreadful warning: this is your choice; this is what your life will be like, one way or another.

And again, we are explicitly told that the penalty for ignoring Jesus is not suffering, but destruction.

5.c. Soul and body in Hell

Jesus does not only talk about eternal life. He also talks about Hell. He seems to be quite clear about what happens in Hell.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.
Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.
(Matthew 10:28)

Of course, the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell is God. People who are familiar with images of Satan ruling a fiery kingdom need to understand this very clearly: Hell is not the kingdom where Satan reigns. Satan does not torment anyone in Hell, and he does not have the power to destroy your soul. The One with the power of destruction is God. And what does He do in Hell? What happens there? Jesus is quite clear: what happens in Hell is destruction, not endless torment.

5.d. Those who are thrown out

The New Testament does not always promise destruction as the alternative to eternal life – at least, not explicitly. Sometimes the contrast is implicit.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that useless people will be ‘thrown out’. It is another very familiar passage: “You are the salt of the earth ...”

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. (Matthew 5:13)

What do you do with useless salt? You just throw it out, you get rid of it. You throw it onto the path or the road, and it disappears. You don’t need to do anything to destroy it: it just disappears as people and animals walk over it.

It is not exactly destruction, but the end point is the same – the useless salt is gone. And, yet again, there is no hint of God wanting to torment those who refuse to participate in the life of His Kingdom.

5.e. Sowing to the flesh

Another place where destruction is implied can be found in Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption,
but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.
(Galatians 6:8)

Paul describes two possibilities: you can sow to your flesh, or you can sow to the Spirit. If you sow to the Spirit, you reap eternal life. The alternative is that you reap – what? Suffering? Torment? No: you reap corruption. If Paul wanted to teach that we need to avoid eternal torment, then he was an incredibly poor communicator.

Just to be clear here: the word ‘corruption’ refers to the process of decay which happens to a dead body. The dead body eventually returns to the soil. It disappears. Corruption is the process which turns a human being into ... nothing. The choice we face is literally eternal life, or nothing. It is the same truth that we find elsewhere in the Bible, described in slightly different words.

Peter makes the same point as Paul.

Through these [His glory and goodness] he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:4)

What do you think Peter should be rejoicing about? If he believed we escape eternal torment, that would surely be worth celebrating! But instead, he tells us that God's glory and goodness enable us to escape the corruption in the world. Perhaps he is right; perhaps corruption, not torment, is what we escape.

5.f. Righteous judgement

In most of the Biblical passages which deal with the fate of people who reject God, destruction is the threatened punishment. However, we should recognise that there are a few passages which do not mention destruction, either explicitly or implicitly. We find one example in Romans.

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God 'will repay each person according to what they have done.' To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favouritism. (Romans 2:5-11)

And another in Ephesians.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

And another in the gospels.

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:34-38)

When we were dead in our sins, we deserved God's wrath; for those who reject the truth there will be wrath and anger; whoever is ashamed of Jesus will find that Jesus is ashamed of them. There is a wide variety of language used in the Bible to describe the fate of those who reject God, but I would like to make just three points here.

- There is a wide variety of language, but no inconsistency: all of these passages are entirely consistent with the Bible's teaching that those who reject Gos will be destroyed.
- The lack of any reference to destruction in these passages is not an argument against destruction: we believe that God is loving and gracious, despite the many passages in the Bible which do not mention His love or grace.
- These passages do not teach about eternal torment, either: 'trouble and distress' does not mean 'eternal torment'; 'deserving of wrath' does not mean 'deserving of eternal torment'.

In summary, there are some passages in the Bible which do not teach us about destruction, but there are many which do; and (as we are going to establish), there are none which teach us about eternal torment.

5.g. Those who refuse to follow Jesus

So, if you refuse to follow Jesus, you face destruction. This simple message is consistently taught throughout the New Testament.

We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. (Hebrews 10:39)

The parallel is simple and unavoidable. There are only two options presented to us: we can shrink back, or believe. If we believe, we shall be saved; if we shrink back, we shall be destroyed. The choice is salvation or destruction. We can either live, or perish.

5.h. Those who oppose Jesus

If you refuse to follow Jesus, you face destruction. But what of those who go beyond refusing, beyond shrinking back? What of those who actively oppose Jesus? Surely they deserve a worse fate?

Yet again, we do not have to guess. Paul tells us very clearly about the fate of these people.

many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction (Philippians 3:18b-19a)

Paul is simply following the teaching of Jesus here. The same message is found in the parable of the Ten Minas. We cannot take one detail from a parable to establish doctrine, but we can note yet another place in the New Testament where the punishment for opposing God is death and not torment. At the conclusion of the parable, the King (representing God) pronounces a final judgement:

But those enemies of mine ... bring them here and kill them in front of me." (Luke 19:27)

Peter also gives us the same message about those who oppose Jesus, but in this case he is talking about false prophets and false teachers.

They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves. (2 Peter 2:1)

The point is repeated a couple of verses later.

Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. (2 Peter 2:3)

And then again.

But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish. (2 Peter 2:12)

5.i. *No more tears*

The final substantial argument that the ungodly will perish also serves a secondary purpose: it solves a problem that many evangelicals struggle with – the apparent support for Universalism in various passages. Take this well-known passage for example.

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

If “all things in heaven and on earth” will be brought together under Christ, does this not mean that everyone will eventually be saved? People do sometimes claim this passage is teaching that Hell and the people in Hell must be included in the “all things” which will be brought under the headship of Christ, but this ignores the context of the verse: Paul is talking here about the spiritual blessings we have in Christ.

We *will be* brought together under one head, Christ (Ephesians 1:10), because we *were* included in Christ (Ephesians 1:13). The passage does not make sense if you think that the people being tormented in Hell will be brought together under the headship of Christ without being included in Christ.

It violates the sense of the passage to argue that the ungodly are included in the “all things” brought under the headship of Christ here – but if that interpretation is not possible, what can the “all things” possibly mean?

We find the same idea in Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

And we see it again in Colossians.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
(Colossians 1:19-20)

And in 1 Corinthians.

When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be

subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:28, NASB)

I'm sure you are ahead of me. If the ungodly will one day perish, then all those who remain can be brought together under the headship of Christ; every knee can bow and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord; all things can be reconciled to Jesus and God can be all in all.

This interpretation is simple, straightforward and (dare I say it?) obvious. It preserves the clear meaning of the text while still recognising that some people will, in the end, reject God – as taught in many Biblical passages but denied by the Universalists.

This also solves the problem in Revelation which so many who believe in eternal torment fail to address. John tells us in chapter 21:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

John is describing here a new creation – “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1) means that *everything* is new.¹⁰ If the ungodly are being tormented in Hell, how can it be that there is no more crying or pain? It is not possible. John tells us there is no more pain because the ungodly are not writhing in torment: they are, quite simply, no more. They didn't make it into the new creation. They perished with the old.

Some people object that this is a mis-reading of the situation at the end of Revelation: according to their reading of the text, we are told that the ungodly will still remain.

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Revelation 22:14-15)

There are a number of points to make in response to this suggestion.

Firstly, it is a strange literalism to suggest that John wants us to imagine the gates of the New Jerusalem, with these ungodly people just hanging around because they have nowhere better to go. The point is that these people do not make it into the city, they don't get to enjoy the new life. The message is: you don't want to be one of these people.

Secondly, we have already been told where these people are.

He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – they will be consigned to

10 If you are not convinced that John uses the term ‘heaven and earth’ to mean ‘everything’, please have a look at Appendix section 4.c, “Heaven and Earth”.

the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.” (Revelation 21:6-8)

The ungodly have been sent to the fiery lake, the second death – the final death, after the resurrection and the judgement.

And thirdly, all the language here speaks of banishment and death, not torment. The fiery lake is death, not pain. The ungodly are outside the gates, not writhing in agony. However you interpret these verses, they cannot be used as support for the doctrine of eternal torment.

There is one final observation, while we are considering the people who do not make it into the New Jerusalem. It is very hard to make sense of these passages from a Universalist perspective: if we are supposed to believe that everyone is saved in the end, then what is the point of these passages about the godless and the cowardly, and what could they mean?

This is, of course, just a specific example of a general weakness of the Universalist position – the way it seems to rob so much of the Bible of any meaning or relevance. John 3:16 is, yet again, an excellent example – if God sent His Son into the world so that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but receive eternal life, and if everyone receives eternal life, then how are we supposed to understand the condition at the heart of this promise – ‘everyone who believes’? Very many of the Bible’s promises have this kind of condition attached, which makes perfect sense if we have a real choice to make, but is simply confusing and misleading if everyone in the end will chose life.

5.j. Rejecting the Creator

There is one further line of thought pointing us in the direction of destruction as the fate of the wicked. I can’t claim it is a major Biblical theme, but it is a consistent idea running throughout the Bible, giving us another set of passages which suggest another way of reaching the same conclusion as the passages we have looked at so far.

God is consistently revealed to us in the Bible as the Creator, the source of everything. Satan can twist and pervert, but he can’t create; all he can do is to damage what has been created.

But God is more than just a Creator who fashions a clockwork universe and sets it going: He not only created in the past, He continues to sustain His creation moment by moment (Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3).

God is made known through His creation, as any work of art speaks to us of its creator. But God is also experienced through His creation, as an encounter with His continuing activity. Simply by existing, we are listening to the symphony of love being created and played for us by our Heavenly Father.

So any experience of creation is an experience of God. God is revealed in creation – He communicates Himself through what He has made, and is known through it (Romans 1:20). The air you breathe is a blessing from God, the food you eat is an expression of His grace. Your own body continues to exist because He loves you.

However, people cannot presume on God’s grace. The blessings He continues to

pour out will one day come to an end if people do not choose to return His love. He requires a response from us.

And what of those who choose not to respond to His love? If, in the end, you reject God, then you reject His blessings. Almost every passage of the Bible teaches this truth, one way or another. If you receive God, you receive His blessings; if you reject Him, you reject His blessings. The good God and the good things from God, in the end, go together.

But if those who reject God – whether they realise it or not! – also reject His blessings, in the end, what will they have left? Since all things come from Him, those who reject God, reject everything. Our continued existence is an act of God's love and grace. Those who reject Him are rejecting, in the end, their very selves. You cannot exist without enjoying God's blessing, so if you reject God and all His blessings, what can possibly be left? Only the prospect of eternal non-existence.

6. The Weaker Evidence for Eternal Torment

We have seen so far that the vast majority of the Biblical text supports the idea that the unrighteous will perish. What about the texts which are used to support the idea that they will not be destroyed, but instead will suffer eternal torments?

Let us take a work of systematic theology that argues for the eternal torment of the lost, and examine every one of the texts presented to support this view. If you feel I have failed to address any significant passage, do let me know – the contact details are at the end. I will add any missing passages to any future edition of this work.

For reasons which, I hope, will become obvious, I have divided the list into two parts: the weaker evidence, and the stronger evidence.

The weaker evidence comes in these passages.

- Matthew 25:41, Matthew 25:46
- Matthew 18:9
- Mark 9:44 (quoting Isaiah 66:24)
- 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9
- Jude 7, Jude 13

The stronger evidence comes in just two passages.

- Revelation 14:9-11
- Revelation 20:10

This list comes from *Know the Truth* by Bruce Milne.¹¹ To be fair, Milne does note that “conditional immortality is viewed by some as a viable biblical understanding of the future state of the impenitent” (which is a very odd way of communicating the idea: their future state is that they have no future state!) and he admits that the terms commonly used in the Bible, such as ‘destruction’, ‘ruin’ and ‘perishing’ “can imply some eventual termination of life” (as if you can perish or be destroyed without having your life terminated!) – but he clearly prefers the traditional position, even if it is uncomfortable.

There are many other reference works we could have chosen, but they all cover much the same ground. There are numerous works of systematic theology, and everyone will have their own preference, but in this area it seems to make very little difference which one you choose, the content is much the same.

Moving away from the systematic theologies, the best (as in recent, reliable and readable) reference book I have found is *The Nature of Hell*, published by the Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals. It documents the result of a two-year study they undertook on Hell.

11 Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, page 337.

We have already looked at 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 in section 4.e, “The Day of the Lord”. Here are the others. And, remember, this is the *best* evidence in the Bible that the wicked will suffer eternal conscious torment.

6.a. *The sheep and the goats*

We start with an account provided by Jesus of the final judgement “when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him” (Matthew 25:31).

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Matthew 25:32-33)

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ (Matthew 25:41)

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:46)

The first thing to note is that this passage is often referred to as the parable of the sheep and the goats. But Jesus is giving us clear and explicit teaching about the end times here: this is not a parable, a story about sheep and goats but teaching about people who can be likened in some way to sheep and goats, information about what will happen to them – they will be separated into two groups in the same way that a shepherd separates sheep from goats. This is not a story which has to be interpreted, but teaching which has to be obeyed.

So what does Jesus tell us about the ‘goats’ – the people on His left, who are to be punished?

The ‘goats’ are to depart into eternal fire, which is eternal punishment. Remember – *fire* means *destruction*, not pain. Punishment can involve pain, but there are many forms of punishment which do not.

If the punishment is destruction, why is the fire described as being ‘eternal’? The passage does not say, but it does suggest one possible answer: the fire is eternal because it was prepared for the devil and his angels, not for people.

We have already touched on the other reason several times: ‘eternal’ in the Bible does not mean ‘never ending’ – it means ‘never failing’. The fire will do its work completely: nothing will remain. The fire may be eternal in exactly the same way that the fire which consumed Sodom and Gomorrah as we saw in chapter 4.

So there is nothing in this passage to suggest that the wicked suffer eternal conscious torment. Instead, it fits very well with the 2 Thessalonians passage we looked at – being consigned to the fire as an eternal punishment corresponds perfectly to the doctrine of everlasting destruction: destruction which can never be reversed, a final punishment which can never be changed.

From this passage, it is possible to argue that the Bible teaches about eternal conscious torment – but it is not the eternal conscious torment of human beings: it is the eternal conscious torment of the devil and his angels. We will come back to this thought when we look at Revelation in chapter 7.

6.b. *If your eye causes you to sin*

Bruce Milne refers to Matthew 18:9, but we might as well consider the previous verse as well.

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. (Matthew 18:8-9)

Jesus is repeating a point He made in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:29-30). This time, He is answering the question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1)

In Matthew 5, the context is: Jesus has come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, not abolish them, so do not sin; it is much easier to sin than you thought; and Hell is a worse fate than anything else you can imagine.

In Matthew 18, the context is the question about greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven, which Jesus typically takes in an unexpected direction: if you want to be great, be like a child – even though children are weak and vulnerable to being harmed by others. It is better to suffer sin than commit it; and while, in this world, some harm is inevitable, do not be the person who makes it happen.

As a quick aside, this passage provides us with the response Jesus gives to the people who deal in guns and illegal drugs. The justification offered by these people is inevitably along the lines of, “Yes, my product will cause harm, but somebody will supply these things if I don’t, so what does it matter whether it is me or someone else?” It makes no difference to the drug addict or the victim of the guns you sold – they don’t care who sold the drugs or the guns. But if *you* sell them, it makes a difference to *you*: it harms you. And people were harmed by what you sold: if you do not care about the effect of your actions on other people, you are on the road to Hell; and there is no worse fate.

Jesus is seeking to make people understand just how bad Hell is and how strongly you should seek to avoid it. If there is a context in which we would expect Jesus to talk about eternal torment, this would be it. But even here, eternal torment is absent from the text.

The meaning of this passage is very straightforward, unless you have already decided, that ‘the fire of Hell’ must mean eternal torment. Jesus is describing two possible fates: you can either enter life (and thus, presumably, live); or you can be thrown into the fire of Hell (and thus, presumably, die).

6.c. *Causing to sin*

The parallel passage in Mark says much the same as the Matthew passage we have just looked at.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you

to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.' Everyone will be salted with fire. (Mark 9:43-49)

The fire never goes out – this could be a reference to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; it could mean you should not hope to get lucky – don't gamble on the possibility that someone will have let the fire go out on the day you arrive down there; but it is probably just recognising that there is a fairly constant supply of food for the worms and fuel for the fire.

Mark is quoting from Isaiah 66, a passage which is not entirely clear. It seems to be describing a massive procession in which all the redeemed people go and look at the dead bodies of those who rebelled against the Lord. Talking about these dead bodies, Isaiah ends with the following description (partly quoted by Mark).

And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind. (Isaiah 66:24)

The description is of dead bodies rotting and burning, not live souls writhing in agony. The worms and the fire serve to emphasise the horror of their fate, the deadness of these dead bodies, as opposed to the vitality of the people who go to look at them. It emphasises that these people are well and truly dead, and nothing is going to change that.

There is not a single hint in Isaiah of the dead people suffering in any way. Quite the opposite: the references to the worm which will not die and the fire which will not be quenched clearly mean that the process of destruction will not cease until all the dead bodies have completely disappeared. The worm and the fire will not stop until they have completed their job.

The process of destruction will not be a quick one: the worm and the fire will last at least a month (from one new moon to another). It seems to be extended in order to give "all mankind" (Isaiah 66:23) the opportunity to go out and look at the dead bodies and, presumably, be reminded of the consequences of rebelling against God. The message being emphasised by Isaiah is a familiar one: if you obey God, you choose life, if you rebel against God, you choose death.

By the time of the New Testament, the images of worms and fire symbolising judgement had come to be associated with the Valley of Hinnom to the South-West of Jerusalem (*ge'hinnom* in Hebrew), which is where the word for 'Hell' in this passage (*gehenna* in the Greek) comes from.

The final part is a bit obscure, but it is probably a reference to the idea we have already met several times, expressed in 1 Corinthians 3:13, where "fire will test the quality of each man's work" by burning up everything which is not fit for Heaven.

Again, the reference to fire contains no suggestion of suffering. It is another eternal act, in the sense that the things burnt up will be destroyed for all eternity, but the burning has to take place in a limited period of time before the individual enters Heaven – otherwise the saved individual would never enter Heaven.

(This is the origin of the old idea of Purgatory, but it is very different in content. In Purgatory, the Christian suffers in order to make them fit for Heaven; in 1 Corinthians, the Christian is fit for Heaven, but the works they have done which are not fit for Heaven will be burned up and lost.)

6.d. Fire and darkness

And the angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgement of the great day; just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 6-7)

The punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah is eternal, in the sense that it will never be changed or undone; it is not eternal in the sense that it is still happening and will continue to happen for all eternity. And in any case, this is not a reference to eternal punishment but to a punishment of eternal fire; we have already noted that the fire has completed its work and gone out, the occupants of the place are all dead. Their punishment is complete. Again, as we have already noted, being killed by fire probably hurts – I am not trying to suggest that God’s punishment does not involve *any* pain – but it does not hurt for all eternity.

Jude is warning about godless men who have infiltrated the Church: “These people are blemishes at your love feasts” (Jude 12). Jude goes on to tell us about their fate: they are insubstantial creatures “for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever.” (Jude 13)

I am not entirely sure what the ‘nether gloom of darkness’ means exactly – but it is not exactly convincing proof of the reality of eternal torment. It sounds like the stillness of the grave. Whatever ‘darkness for ever’ might mean, it does not fit the picture of eternal fire; it does fit the picture of destruction.

Jude reminds us, yet again, that the New Testament writers never intended us to understand the fire of Hell as an eternal reality. The fire is symbolic and it means ‘destruction’, not ‘torment’.

6.e. The rich man and Lazarus

The most obvious passage – which, interestingly, is not referenced by Bruce Milne – is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The reason, of course, is that you cannot derive doctrine from the incidental details in a parable.

A parable is a ‘story with a purpose’ – we are intended to take a message away from this story. The message matters – it matters deeply; the details are only there to drive the message home.

Jesus is taking a popular story of His day, and twisting the message. The details in the story are the details His hearers are familiar with – but this does not mean these details are true, or that anyone actually believed them to be true. I can tell you a story about a unicorn, and you will probably know exactly what I am talking about, but this does not mean that either of us actually believe that unicorns exist.

A good Catholic friend of mine recently told me a joke. We had been talking about a former Pope. The story started: “When he [the former Pope] died, Saint Peter met him at the gates of Heaven, and Saint Peter asked ...” Neither of us believe that when we die Saint Peter will meet us at the gates of Heaven and ask us questions, but the setting is culturally familiar to both of us, and the joke needed that setting to make it work.

Jesus is telling the equivalent of a first-century Jewish ‘Saint Peter at the gates of Heaven’ story; He is not providing an insider’s view of the architecture of the afterlife, or making a point about any of the other incidental details.

If you want to take this one parable as an accurate piece of on-the-spot reporting, you must also conclude that Paradise and Hell are close enough to hold a conversation across the gap. You also need to note that it is clearly a description of a single incident in the after-life, it contains no suggestion that the torment is eternal, and the action all takes place soon after the rich man’s death because his five brothers are still alive.

In fact, since the stated basis of the torment is the unfairness of their earthly experience (certainly not an eternal state!), the most obvious implication is that the punishment will also be limited in time – otherwise the unfairness of their earthly experience will be vastly outweighed by the unfairness of their after-life experience.

If you want to take this one parable as an accurate piece of on-the-spot reporting, you need to ask yourself this question: if Jesus wanted to teach us that people will suffer torment in Hell, why did He hide this vital news in the detail of a parable, and why did He not explain it explicitly to His disciples – as He did for so many of the other parables they struggled to understand correctly?

And, if you think this passage describes the literal truth, why are the details here found nowhere else in the entire Bible, neither in the Old nor in the New Testament, hidden away in a parable?

I am doing my best to avoid talking about the history of this doctrine, but we need to make one final point about this parable: it was only in the Middle Ages that the church started to generally interpret this parable as telling us about Hell. Up to that point, when people believed the parable was talking about an actual place, it was understood to be talking about *hades*: the intermediate state experienced by people before the resurrection and final judgement.

This makes sense because, as we have noted, the action in the parable clearly takes place in this current age, soon after the rich man’s death: the request for Abraham to go to his father’s house and talk to his brothers clearly requires his brothers to be alive. The scene takes place before the Second Coming and the Final Judgement, not after. Whatever we may be taught today, for centuries the church did not think that the punishment in this parable was eternal in duration.¹²

The message of the parable is found in the final verse: “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Everything else is building up to and supporting that one simple message. Milne knows this, as does every other respectable Biblical teacher, which is why he

12 For more on this point, please see (for example) Jacoby, *What’s the Truth About Heaven and Hell?*, page 101.

does not use it as Biblical evidence for the doctrine of eternal torment.

6.f. Shame and contempt

Another passage which is sometimes used comes at the end of Daniel.

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2)

The first thing to note is that this comes firmly within the apocalyptic section in Daniel. This is a form of literature which people were very familiar with when it was written, but seems very strange to us today. You have to interpret what is said very carefully, according to the well-established rules, in much the same way as you have to interpret the meaning of a political cartoon in a newspaper: they both use symbols and images to communicate a message, and neither expects to be taken literally.

The great challenge in reading apocalyptic literature lies in interpreting the images correctly: sometimes it seems reasonably clear, but at other times there is no agreement on the meaning and all we have is one person convinced of one interpretation and someone else convinced of another.

My personal rule of thumb goes like this: if it is not clear, I probably don't need to worry too much about it. If God wants or needs me to understand a passage, He is quite capable of making it clear, and has a wide variety of tools at His disposal to achieve that end.

Peter gives us advice about how to handle such passages in his second letter.

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Peter tells us that the scriptures contain some things that are hard to understand, and that ignorant and unstable people distort these things; he tells us this is not a good thing to do; the penalty, yet again, is destruction rather than torment. But if the scripture is hard to understand, how do we avoid distorting it? By recognising that it is unclear; by being honest about what we can (and what we cannot) say with confidence; and by accepting that I do not need to fully understand every passage of scripture right now.

God does not expect me to perfectly understand today every part of the Bible, but I think He does expect me to be seeking an ever-increasing understanding of His Word, of His Heart and of the world He has placed us in.

I seek to understand the Bible (just as I seek to be sensitive to the Spirit's voice) so I can follow Jesus and live the way He wants me to. I believe He wants me to understand the Bible, so I try to be open to all the ways He may use to shape my understanding. But, if His purpose for my life does not depend upon me understanding every verse in the Bible right now, it's probably okay if I act on the parts which are clear right now, and trust that, as we work together, the unclear bits will become clear by the time I need to act on them.

Other people phrase things a bit differently, but it generally comes down to much the same point: Biblical interpretation works from the passages which are clear, and interprets the passages which are less clear in the light of those which are more clear. John Wesley expresses the point as clearly as any.

The general rule of interpreting Scripture is this: the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it be not contrary to some other texts. But in that case, the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly.¹³

All of which explains why we do not base doctrine on what we find in apocalyptic literature: it can illuminate our understanding of Biblical truth, but it should not be used as the starting point. This becomes quite relevant when we come to look at the passages in Revelation.

That said, this section of Daniel seems reasonably straightforward. It is, rarely for the Old Testament, entirely consistent with New Testament teaching on the end days: there will be a resurrection; some of those resurrected will enjoy everlasting life, while others suffer shame and everlasting contempt.

There is, I admit, nothing here about destruction; but, equally well, there is nothing about eternal torment. People can look back at your memory with contempt long after you have died. The contempt can be everlasting, even if you are not.

6.g. The fiery furnace

We stay with Daniel for the last passage providing weak evidence for eternal torment: the story of the image of gold and the fiery furnace in chapter 3. King Nebuchadnezzar makes an image of gold and commands everyone to worship it.

Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace. (Daniel 3:6)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are denounced for failing to worship the image; they are threatened with the furnace, they refuse to obey and testify to their faith in God. Nebuchadnezzar orders the furnace to be heated “seven times hotter than usual” (Daniel 3:19).

The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. (Daniel 3:22-23)

You probably know what happens next, and there is no suffering involved.

The passage says nothing about eternal torment. In fact, it says nothing about torment at all. This is the only passage in the Bible in which people are thrown into fire, and there is no mention of suffering. Yes, I assume that the soldiers killed by the fire suffered to some extent, but the Biblical text does not talk about their suffering.

The fire here fulfils its clear purpose: it kills people. God intervenes with the natural way of things, and causes people to live who had expressed faith in Him and, without His intervention, would have perished. We can hardly avoid seeing echoes of

13 John Wesley, Letter to Samuel Furly, 10 May, 1755.

John 3:16 here; and, yet again, we can see nothing of eternal torment.

7. The Stronger Evidence for Eternal Torment

7.a. The lake of burning sulphur

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (Revelation 20:10)

Let's admit it up front: this passage talks about eternal torment. In fact, it is the only passage in the entire Bible which talks about eternal torment. But notice who is being tormented: it is the devil, the beast and the false prophet.

Jesus may have told us that the fire was "prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41), but this passage suggests that in fact most of the angels will escape this fate – if you interpret the passage literally, that is.

And yet again, there is no suggestion here that ordinary human beings will be tormented for ever. Possibly the beast and the false prophet are human – the point is not clear – but, even if this is so, they are the only two humans to suffer eternal torment.

And we should also remember that several passages in the Old Testament (Isaiah 47:14, Ezekiel 28:18-19) have been understood as suggesting that Satan's suffering will also come to an end. This might also be implied by David.

He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbour his anger forever; (Psalm 103:9)

And, while we may not normally make the connection, is there any reason to suppose that the 'no more crying or pain' in Revelation 21:4 would not apply to Satan? In fact, most of the argument we have already considered in section 5.i, 'No more tears' could also apply to Satan. The argument in section 7.d, 'Day and night' below would certainly apply. So maybe, even for him, 'for ever' means 'until it is finished'.

Finally, in passing, I would like to note how easy it is for John to tell us about eternal torment. "They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." It is not complicated or difficult. Please bear this in mind when we look at the following passage.

7.b. Smoke of torment

We return now to the promised smoke.

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the

smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” (Revelation 14:9-11)

I should say at the outset that this is the ONLY passage in the entire Bible that seems to teach us about humans suffering eternal torment. If you want to believe in eternal torment, and if you want a Biblical foundation for that belief, this passage is all you have.

And even this passage does not talk about eternal torment.

It does clearly talk about torment. “He will be tormented with burning sulphur” seems clear enough. As I have noted before, the eternal fate of the wicked is destruction, but this does not mean that no suffering is involved.

But even this passage does not say that the torment is eternal. It talks about: (a) drinking the wine of God’s fury; (b) being tormented with burning sulphur; (c) the smoke of the torment rising for ever; and (d) lack of rest day or night.

If you believe in eternal torment, then the ‘wine of God’s fury’ will no doubt be understood to be a reference to eternal torment, but without that belief it suggests nothing of the sort.

7.c. *Eternal smoke*

The language here is quite fascinating. It would have been very easy for John to say something like, “He will be tormented for ever with burning sulphur,” but even here he avoids any reference to eternal torment. The only ‘for ever’ is the smoke going up – the *consequence* of the torment can be seen for ever.

The natural way of reading this passage is that these people will be tormented. The torment will produce smoke. The torment will cease, but the smoke produced will continue to rise, just as Abraham saw the smoke rising from the burning cities (Genesis 19:27-28) *after* their inhabitants had been killed; in this case, the smoke rises for ever, as an eternal memorial to this punishment. Eternal smoke does not mean eternal torment.

If you are still not sure about this point, then a quick look at Revelation chapters 18 and 19 might help. In Revelation 18:1-8, we read about the fall of Babylon the Great. It will probably not be a surprise to discover in verse 8 that she will be ‘consumed by fire’.

When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. (Revelation 18:9)

The point of the smoke is that people will see it, and understand what has happened. The point is made again in verses 17-18.

And every shipmaster and every passenger and sailor, and as many as make their living by the sea, stood at a distance, and were crying out as they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, “What city is like the great city?” (Revelation 18:17-18)

The response in Heaven is a great multitude shouting praise to God. (Revelation

19:1)

And again they shouted: “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.” (Revelation 19:3)

The point should be clear enough: smoke is going up for ever, but there is no suggestion that the burning goes on for ever. The fall of the ‘great city’ is an event which has a beginning and an end: this is not an account of destruction which starts and then continues for ever. It is destruction because the thing suffering destruction is actually destroyed, as we would expect. But the doctrine of eternal torment requires us to believe – without any evidence! – the promised destruction of the wicked means that the people suffering destruction are not destroyed.

The smoke, in both Revelation 14 and Revelation 19, tells people what has happened: it goes up for ever because they need to remember.

7.d. Day and night

And this only leaves the final phrase. There is just one small phrase in the entire Bible on which you can attempt to build a doctrine of eternal torment.

John tells us, “There is no rest day or night” for these people (Revelation 14:11). Now, God is quite capable of being clear when there is something He wants us to know, understand and believe; and whatever this means, it is not a clear statement of the doctrine of eternal torment.

You can interpret ‘no rest day or night’ as referring to eternal torment. But that is your interpretation: the doctrine is not in the text.

We are told by many commentators that this text (saying that some people will be tormented day and night) proves the reality of eternal torment because the Bible fails to say that this day and night torment will come to an end, but this rather stretches the principles of sound Biblical interpretation. The argument being used is very simple: “I am going to believe that the torment is eternal, because the Bible does not explicitly say that it is not.”

There is nothing to stop people believing things on the basis that the Bible does not explicitly deny them; however, the normal practice is to establish doctrine on the basis of the things that the Bible does explicitly teach.

What John seems to be saying is that the torment continues without a break, which is why there is no rest. But ‘day and night’ is not forever: it only means that the torment, *while it is taking place*, continues without a break.

If a person is tormented day and night, we would normally expect this to go on for days or weeks. There is no reason (no reason in the Bible, that is!) to suppose that ‘day and night’ is actually intended to convey the idea of eternity.

Moreover, in the context of the book of Revelation, the phrase ‘day and night’ can be taken as evidence that the lack of rest is *not* eternal: by the time we reach the final chapters (Revelation 21:25 and Revelation 22:5), there is no more night.

7.e. *No rest*

But even if we put all these considerations to one side, it is still a very odd choice of words. If you want to convey the idea of continual torment, it is very easy to say something like, “He will be tormented day and night with burning sulphur” – but John avoids saying it clearly.

Instead, the words John uses suggest a very low level of suffering. Having ‘no rest’ makes it sound more like they are worrying about something. It certainly does not suggest that they are suffering unspeakable torment.

The phrase ‘no rest’ suggests that the discomfort is mental rather than physical. I could keep you awake for a long time by continually inflicting pain, but would you describe this process as being given ‘no rest’? I think not.

On the other hand, if you have done something dreadful, if you have let down and hurt someone you loved or someone who deserved a much better response from you, then remorse, guilt and regret may give you no rest. And this makes perfect sense in the context of the passage: these people have chosen to worship the beast, and now they know the full extent of their folly.

If it is the regret which produces no rest day or night, then the most natural way to read the “tormented with burning sulphur” bit is as a symbolic representation of the internal torment these people inflict on themselves.

I know this suggestion is a bit radical. I have been accused sometimes of ‘distorting the Bible’ by suggesting that a reference to burning sulphur in the book of Revelation might best be interpreted symbolically. But if you read the book very carefully, you might find a few other places where John slips in references to other things which might be intended to be interpreted symbolically. And if you keep studying it, and maybe read a few responsible commentaries, you may come to the conclusion that the whole book of Revelation is packed full of symbolism, and you cannot understand it without seeking to understand the symbols.

So the reading of this passage which makes the most sense in context is that these people are tormented – they torment themselves for their own folly.

In any case, the passage does *not* say that they will be eternally drinking the wine of God’s fury, that they will be eternally tormented, or that they will have no rest for ever.

When we consider what these passages actually say, from the perspective of our current examination, it makes very little difference whether you understand Revelation to be mainly literal or mainly symbolic: if it is supposed to be understood literally, you have to stretch the meaning if you want to claim it refers to eternal torment; and if it is supposed to be understood symbolically, reading eternal torment into the text makes even less sense.

And the only passage in the entire Bible which could possibly be taken as the basis for a belief in the eternal torment of unbelieving people still does not teach – in fact, it does not even mention – eternal torment.

7.f. *For ever*

We have already noted that terms like ‘eternal’ and ‘everlasting’ are generally used in the Bible to refer to purpose, not duration. That is still the case here.

We have already seen that a few chapters later, the smoke from Babylon (‘the great prostitute’) is described as going up “for ever and ever” (Revelation 19:3) without any hint of eternal torment.

And, shortly afterwards, we see “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Revelation 21:1). Are we expected to understand that the smoke from these suffering souls and from Babylon is drifting up somewhere in the new heaven or the new earth? I honestly can’t imagine that this is what John is describing.

All of which is to say, that in the Bible generally, and even more so in the context of this part of Revelation, we cannot assume the words ‘for ever’ mean ‘time without end’. As in many other passages, the obvious, simple and consistent understanding is that it refers to purpose, not duration.

So the only text in the entire Bible which might teach eternal torment does not actually mention eternal torment, and it is found in a book which is full of symbolism, where we are not expected to understand a great deal of what is said in a literal way.

Perhaps I don’t need to say this, but just in case ... It is a well-established principle of exegesis that you do not attempt to establish doctrine on the basis of a single text. And remember the advice from John Wesley: do not use obscure passages to establish doctrine which contradicts other clearer passages.

Both these principles caution us against using the only passage in the Bible which can be taken to say there *may be* eternal torment as a simple ‘proof text’ for the doctrine.

7.g. *Nobody yet*

I have just one final point to close off this section. Even if we are supposed to interpret this passage literally, even if it does talk about eternal conscious torment, it is still (as yet) an academic issue. According to the passage, nobody who has yet died has suffered this fate. So (at the time of writing!) this passage does not allow you to threaten anyone that if they die tonight, they will suffer eternal torment.

Remember the context: if you do decide, against all sound theological advice, to base your belief in eternal torment on this one passage, you cannot apply it to *anyone* until after the angel flying in mid-air has proclaimed the gospel to everyone living on the earth, and after Babylon the Great has fallen (Revelation 14:6-9) – and even then you can only warn people that this dreadful fate will befall those who receive the mark of the beast on their foreheads or their hands.

7.h. *Summary*

There are many passages in the Bible, both Old and New Testament, that clearly teach the wicked will perish, die, or be destroyed.

In contrast, there is not a single passage teaching that wicked people will suffer eternal torment. What we have are a number of passages which *might* refer to eternal torment, if that was what the Bible taught elsewhere, but which clearly do not teach or even suggest the idea of eternal torment themselves.

There is only one passage (Revelation 14:9-11) which might possibly teach that a few specific people will be tormented for ever – but even that passage does not talk about eternal torment, and it is more likely that the passage refers to a limited period of intense regret for personal sin and missed opportunities.

The only clear reference to eternal torment in the Bible (Revelation 20:10) is not about people, but about the devil, and this one passage needs to be balanced against other passages which suggest the torment will not be for ever, and even Satan will one day be turned to ashes and the fire be allowed to go out.

As I said at the outset, it is *possible* to hold to a belief in eternal torment for the wicked, but your reason for holding that belief cannot be that the Bible teaches it. In the light of all the Bible says on this subject, can we not be confident that Jesus was clearly telling us the truth, that John 3:16 means exactly what it says, and, one day, the wicked will perish?

Part Three: The Application

8. Opportunities

At this point, I am going to assume we have clearly established that Jesus was right: there are two options open to us; we can follow Him and choose life, or reject Him and choose death.

Part Three is where we unpack something of what this means for us, where we consider some of the consequences which follow from understanding Hell as destruction rather than eternal torment.

It seems probable that you can distinguish good doctrine from bad by examining their fruit – that is, by understanding their consequences – just as Jesus says we can do with prophets (Matthew 7:16). For most doctrines, there are consequences in each of the three key areas we are required to focus on: Kingdom, community and character, corresponding to the three elements of the ‘greatest commandment’ (love God, love your neighbour and love yourself) (Matthew 22:36-40), and our belief about Hell is no different.

Much of modern life in the Western world is dreadfully individualistic, and the church often accepts this cultural norm as if it were God’s will. The point of believing the right doctrine is that it enables us to live the way God wants us to and the reason why doctrinal error matters is because bad doctrine gets in the way of us living the way He wants, the way He knows is best.

The benefits of good doctrine and the harm done by bad doctrine do not just affect us as individuals. We will talk about the consequences of adopting a Biblical understanding of Hell mainly in terms of the difference it makes to individuals: this is partly because this is the level at which these battles are mostly fought, and partly because any serious attempt to spell out the consequences of each set of beliefs for the church community, for the society in which we live and for the way we work to establish God’s Kingdom of peace and love would take far too long.

Suffice it to say that our beliefs shape our lives and both our beliefs and our lives shape our communities; if we believe and teach that the God we worship is okay with tormenting people for all eternity, that will – to some extent – determine who chooses to join us in worshipping this God. And the ways we invest our time and energy to build the Kingdom of God will be largely determined by the character of the God Whose Kingdom we are building.

When we look back, as many people are doing, at the Protestant Reformation, we can see how apparently obscure beliefs can have far-reaching consequences (that is to say, many people *at the time* believed them to be obscure and unimportant) – and these consequences were far-reaching, not only for the individuals who believe these doctrines, but also for the Church and for the society in which we live. God’s purposes turn on the things we believe, the way we relate to Him, and the difference this makes to the way we live.

So, whether we understand the wider consequences or even think about them, what we believe is one vital part of God's rule being worked out in our lives. Getting our doctrine straight is a critical challenge; we then have to live it and communicate it to others.

When we talk to people about God and about what happens after death, we need to be able to talk clearly and confidently. Two areas where we frequently come up against these issues are in pastoral care and evangelism: we can't cover either one in any depth, but we can offer some initial pointers.

People often claim that the doctrine of conditional immortality will have all kinds of bad consequences; these threatened consequences make some people quite fearful – unreasonably fearful – of the doctrine. Most of the concerns expressed are in the area of evangelism. The more common of these concerns are:

- this doctrine will blunt our evangelistic message; and
- this doctrine will make some Christians less motivated to engage in evangelism.

We will look briefly at each of these fears in a moment, and identify some of the opportunities they present.

But first, we need to get these responses into perspective. *Even if the fears are well founded, they are irrelevant.* We still have a responsibility to examine whether the doctrine is true.

After all, we can easily point to other doctrines which reduce the probability of people being saved because they do not like the message – salvation by grace alone is a prime example! We preach God's truth because we believe it to be true, not because we have a personal liking for it – and certainly not because we have discovered a set of ideas that people are likely to respond to!

The basic issues here are *truth* and *integrity*. Will we allow our doctrine to be determined by its popularity or its anticipated consequences? Or will we allow our doctrine to be determined by God, through His revealed Word in the Bible? We do need to be concerned about when and how we present God's truth; culture and expectations can shape the way we present the message, but they cannot be allowed to determine the content of the message.

That said, do the believers in eternal torment have a valid concern? Does conditional immortality create problems in our evangelism and pastoral care? Not in my experience.

8.a. The evangelistic message

Will our evangelistic message be blunted if we cannot warn sinners that they will be eternally tormented if they do not repent?

I do not believe so.

- The threat of eternal torment is not an essential part of evangelism: it is not used in a single evangelistic message in the Bible.
- Jesus seems to believe that eternal destruction is an adequate threat. He tells

us to “be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”
(Matthew 10:28)

- I have heard many people give their testimony over the years, and not one person has testified to the threat of eternal torment as one of the means used by God to draw them to Himself.
- Not everyone believes that an eternity of suffering is worse than destruction. Some people say they would prefer to live, even in pain, if the alternative is total and everlasting non-existence.
- We can (if we choose!) still warn people that they will go to Hell, a lost eternity, suffer eternal punishment, and so on. The question of your eternal destiny still matters, whether or not the lost can expect eternal torment.
- Most importantly, do we want people in our churches who are there because they are motivated by the fear of Hell-fire, or do we want people who are there because they are motivated by gratitude and thankfulness for God’s love and grace?

We think that Hell-fire is an essential part of the evangelistic message, largely because it has been a part of the message for so long that we have forgotten there was a time when the Church grew by offering forgiveness and new life, without any threat of the eternal fire.

Of course, there must be a few people for whom the threat of eternal torment was a significant part of their journey to salvation. And maybe, for others, the thought of eternal torment caused them to stop in their tracks and consider spiritual matters. I am not claiming the doctrine of eternal torment can never play a helpful role in helping someone find God: I am saying that this is rare; and I am saying that we cannot justify telling lies about God, even if we think they are useful.

There must be many people through the centuries who have come to salvation through a message which includes the threat of eternal torment. This does not prove that the doctrine is effective, and it certainly does not prove that the doctrine is Biblical; it simply demonstrates that some people are not put off God as a result of this teaching.

This is not academic research, and I have made no effort to find a representative sample of evangelists, but in conversation with numerous evangelists, it seems clear to me that most of them recognise that the doctrine of eternal torment puts people off responding to the Gospel, rather than the reverse. I would encourage you to conduct your own research on this matter.

So, rather than worrying about reduced numbers responding to our Gospel messages if we cease to preach eternal torment, I believe we have a wonderful opportunity to discover a better Gospel message: one which is both more Biblical and more effective. The few who do respond to a message threatening eternal torment must be set off against the many who reject the Christian message because they reject the God of Hell-fire – whether this is an explicit aspect of our evangelistic message, or just something they have learned that Christians believe.

Over the years, I have spent a lot of time talking with people who are not Christians, seeking to hear them and understand what they believe and the reasons for

their beliefs and non-beliefs. The two most common reasons I hear people give for rejecting the Christian faith are that Christians have not demonstrated love (either in general or at some critical moment), and that they threaten unbelievers with eternal torment.

This is even recognised by many people who train evangelists and who produce resource material for them. Take for, example, this passage from a popular apologist, who puts eternal torment alongside abusive churches as a reason why people turn away from Christianity.

First, people have emotional reasons to resist. Many have had annoying experiences with Christians or abusive churches. Others realize that to embrace Christianity would be to admit that cherished loved ones now dead entered eternity without forgiveness and with one fate awaiting them: darkness, despair, and suffering forever. Emotionally, this is something the person simply cannot bear.¹⁴

And this is from someone who believes in eternal torment.

The idea that teaching eternal torment makes it less likely that people will respond to an evangelistic message has recently been reinforced by scientists who study brain activity. They have confirmed what we always knew: that fear suppresses rational thought – so if you scare people with the threat of eternal torment, they are unable to properly take in the message you want them to hear.

But it does not really matter whether Hell-fire causes many people to reject the gospel, or only a few. The threat of eternal torment is a barrier which gets in the way of people responding to God. It is a barrier we have no need of, because it is completely absent from Scripture. It is a barrier the Church has erected in the past, for all kinds of complicated reasons, but a barrier we are now in a position to remove.

Some people object that eternal destruction ‘is only what most non-Christians believe anyway.’ (We consider this briefly in section 9.b on ‘The reality of judgement’: the Biblical teaching on this subject is not, in fact, what most non-Christians believe.) However, whatever most non-Christians believe, if someone claims this as their position, then arguing with them is probably not the most useful strategy to adopt when talking about your faith – you do not want to spend time discussing whether the differences between the two sets of ideas are significant.

Instead, I suggest that a more helpful approach is to use the idea – run with it, rather than opposing it. It is one thing to believe that death is the end if you also believe that there is no alternative; it is another thing altogether to choose death and destruction.

Imagine the conversation. I have just quoted John 3:16, “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And imagine they reply with “I don’t see what’s so bad about that – after all, I was expecting to perish anyway.” At this point, I am quite delighted: there are several obvious responses – very briefly summarised below.

- Are you sure you are not missing the point of what Jesus is saying here? Up to now, you thought that death was the inevitable end of the story, but Jesus

14 Koukl, *Tactics*, Chapter 11: Steamroller.

is offering you a choice. You can choose to reject His offer of life, you can reject Him out of hand if you like, but if there is any chance at all that He is telling the truth, why would you not want to investigate that possibility?

- Are you seriously saying that you would prefer to choose death and destruction rather than accepting the life that Jesus offers? If that really was the case, why are you alive and talking to me right now? If you really wanted to choose death rather than life, I suspect you would have done it already.
- Jesus is offering you life – not just boring, miserable survival, but a wonderful, joyful life – life in all its abundance! He is not just offering unending existence after you die, He is offering a transformed, vibrant, meaningful and purposeful life right now. Who would not want that?

Of course, that last point is a bit of a two-edged sword: they can validly ask why most of the Christians they meet seem to be glum and miserable, rather than enjoying this joyful, vibrant, purposeful life? But the failure of other people to fully benefit from what Jesus offers should not prevent them from enjoying what He freely gives. And maybe it is not only those outside the church who need to hear and fully respond to the gospel message?

8.b. Motivating Christians

I am not afraid of blunting our evangelistic message. However, I do recognise that some Christians, and many of those who are called to a ministry of evangelism, are motivated to do evangelism by the desire to rescue people from eternal torment. What of them?

Firstly, we have to say that being effective does not make it right. Every year in democracies across the world, people are elected on the basis of preaching hatred and bigotry: sadly, many people find such messages attractive. I may be able to get elected by feeding a popular fear of foreigners, but that does not make it right. I may be able to motivate you to participate in a church activity by tapping in to your feelings of guilt about the quality of your Christian life and witness, but any good achieved this way would not justify the lie.

More importantly, it is possible for any Christian to discover how the wonder of God's love can motivate us in all our worship and our work for Him. We do not have to be motivated by the threat of torment: there is a better alternative.

Jesus offers life to dying people. Is that not a tremendous gift, and one to get excited about? As we meditate on what the Bible teaches us, and as we grow in grace and Christian maturity so, I believe, we will discover ourselves being motivated by the things God intended. The result will be greater enthusiasm and energy for God's work, not less.

There is another benefit which, in my experience, arises when Christians understand what the Bible actually says about Hell. Yes, some people are motivated to share their faith by the prospect of eternal torment, but far more are put off talking about their faith because they can't bring themselves to threaten Hell-fire as the punishment for rejecting Jesus; and because, even if they don't choose to mention Hell-fire in their message, they are afraid that once they start sharing the Good News, people will ask them about it.

Christians are, on the whole, fairly nice people. Which means that we are, for the most part, far more motivated to tell others about the Good News when we ourselves are convinced that it really is good news, news about a God Who consistently loves us and wants the best for us – news about a God Whose holiness does not compel Him to torment most of the human race for the rest of eternity.

Clearly, consistently and confidently rejecting the doctrine of eternal torment may be the single most effective thing the churches can do to motivate their people to go out and tell others about Jesus.

8.c. Salvation, purpose and goals

When we consider pastoral care, much of the benefit we experience when we accept the doctrine of conditional immortality has already been mentioned in the discussion about evangelism. The problems that people outside the Church have with the idea of eternal torment, and the problems caused by that doctrine, are also problems experienced by many people inside the Church. The only real difference is that, most of the time, most of us are too polite to talk about them.

However, there are other ways in which the doctrine of eternal torment makes a difference to the lives of the people around us. We need to understand the implications of the doctrine for the ways we live and relate to others. One of the most significant changes is to our understanding of salvation: what are we saved from and what are we saved for?

If eternal torment is true, then every other aspect of salvation must be seen in that light – partly because, if it is true, then the God Who says and does everything else is also the God Who torments the unbelievers; and partly because it makes such a massive difference, we cannot help but see everything else in that context. If eternal torment is true, then the question of whether we, or other people, will suffer it or escape it is the only question which truly matters: everything else must be a minor detail in comparison.

So, for example, the New Testament writers repeatedly emphasise the importance of reward in Heaven. Jesus tells us, 'store up for yourselves treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6:20); Paul tells us that 'star differs from star in splendour. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead' (1 Corinthians 15:41-42). But, whatever they may tell us is important, if eternal torment is true then the most important thing about Heaven is that we are escaping the torments of Hell. Who cares about varying amounts of treasure, if the only thing any of us will really care about is that we arrived there safely?

Similarly, the New Testament writers talk repeatedly about how we are to live, use

our time, build the Kingdom, and so on. Jesus went around doing good, healing and blessing people. But if eternal torment is true, then the only thing I want to focus on is to make sure that I get to Heaven; and once I'm confident of that (after all, who, really, can be absolutely certain?) then the next thing which matters is getting other people into Heaven too. Jesus may be able to concentrate on details like giving someone a cup of water (Mark 9:41), but how can we afford such luxuries when our eternal destiny is at stake?

I know that theologians and preachers will talk about 'assurance of salvation' but when you are providing pastoral care to ordinary weak, fallible, doubting, damaged individuals, assurance is only a state of mind, and it is a state which can be lost very easily by many people, especially when you consider all the things the theologians tell us are necessary for salvation. If you are looking for reasons to doubt your salvation – and with the threat of Hell-fire hanging over your head, it would be incredibly foolish not to – then you need look no further than the Athanasian Creed.

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.¹⁵

Other reasons for doubting your salvation are also available, by the bucket-load, as many Pastors will testify. If my God will send billions of people to Hell to be tormented for ever, I cannot sleep easy in my bed.

On the other hand, if God really does love us all, if He loves me, if He wants the best for me, wherever I go and whatever I do, if I don't have the threat of eternal torment hanging over my head, then I can afford to think about something other than my own salvation, I can start to consider how to love my neighbour and whether there are folk in prison who might appreciate a visit.

The doctrine of eternal torment does not change the wording of any other doctrine we find in the Bible, but it puts every other doctrine into a different, un-Biblical, context; and, by changing the context, it changes the meaning and relevance of every other doctrine. It re-frames our salvation and our purpose and goals in life, and by doing so, it is capable of distorting every aspect of our lives.

I am not suggesting that people who believe in eternal torment find it impossible to rest in God's love. But, in my experience, when these people are experiencing the peace of Christ, they are closing their minds to the doctrine, in much the same way that someone with a vital exam coming up may be able to enjoy themselves by forgetting about the exam for a while. It may not be a healthy thing to do, and the peace cannot last.

Again, in my experience, when people who believe in eternal torment actually contemplate what they believe, they are deeply troubled, and this often leads them to re-examine their own position in Christ. It is what they tell me. And this is not just my experience: there is plenty of Christian literature which supports this connection.

It is easy to find examples of lovely, Godly Christians from earlier generations who

15 That is the way the creed starts and, more or less, how it ends, too. The Athanasian Creed was probably not written by Athanasius, but is accepted by most Western denominations. It can be found online in many places, including at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasian_Creed.

had periods in their lives when they suffered complete agony when considering their own salvation and the prospect of Hell-fire. I suspect that the lack of such reported agonies on the part of many prominent Christians today has one of two causes. It might reflect a greater concern about public image than the earlier generations of Christians were troubled by; or perhaps they do not really believe in eternal torment, whatever the public protestations.

I hardly need to say this, but I do not believe that our loving Heavenly Father wants us to suffer such agonies, or to doubt that we are secure in His love and in His purposes; I believe that such miseries are part of the damage inflicted on good Christians who have been misled about both the character of God and the nature of the salvation He invites us to embrace.

Of course, I recognise that there is some Biblical justification for such teaching, even if the clear balance of Biblical teaching lies on the side of confidence in the power of God's love and His ability to keep us safe. It has been claimed that you can take any belief you like and justify it by selected quotes from the Bible, and I would not wish to dispute the point; but while you may be able to justify any belief by selected quotes taken out of context, the same is not true if you look for the meaning through a careful consideration of the language, history and culture of the original texts.

And I don't believe that God plays theological hide-and-seek with us: the things He really wants us to know (God loves us; Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead; ...) are very clear. Passages which focus on the importance of obedience are intended to help us understand His love, not cast doubt on it.

8.d. God's wrath

One opportunity to clarify the Christian message arises when people start to talk about God as someone Who enjoys punishing sinners. People sometimes imagine God as an old man in the clouds peering down at us, waiting for us to do something wrong so that He can smite us. (We only ever hear the word 'smite' in this context: we never use it, but everyone knows exactly what it means – a bit like the doctrine of eternal torment.) As Christians, we sometimes find ourselves reinforcing that parody.

There is a common understanding among Christians that the God we worship is schizophrenic. Of course, we never quite phrase it that way, but the message is clear. I heard it in some responses to earlier drafts of this book: "You talk very passionately about a God of love, but you completely ignore the fact that He is also a God of wrath."

The doctrine of eternal torment fits very nicely into this framework: we see the God of love in the way that sinners are forgiven, and we see the God of wrath in the way that unrepentant sinners are tormented for eternity. According to this teaching, different aspects of God's character are in conflict with one another, so they cannot be expressed at the same time. It is easy to find examples.

we must understand the love of God in light of His other characteristics. God is love, but He is also holy and just, and He frequently pours out wrath toward sin. In fact, God sometimes withholds certain attributes in order to exercise others. For instance, God withholds His wrath to

exercise mercy. God withholds justice to pour out His grace.¹⁶

Sometimes the idea is not expressed as conflict, but simply as difference – love and justice are both present in God.

God is a God of love, but God is also and equally a God of justice and of righteousness; and if God's love is spurned and rejected there remains nothing but the justice and the righteousness and the wrath of God.¹⁷

Either way, the effect is the same. We tell people: on the one hand, God is merciful, and therefore doesn't want to punish us; but on the other hand, God is just, and therefore must punish sin. Our poor God finds Himself pulled in two completely different directions, but fortunately He found a way to resolve His dilemma.

Within this framework, the cross is the solution to God's problem: through the cross, God can retain both His love and His justice. We don't ever put it in those terms, but it is all too often what we manage to communicate. What we tell people is often sound theology as far as it goes ("God sent His son to die in order to bring together His kindness and justice"), but it doesn't really make sense to the people we are talking with.

Many people outside the church hear us talking about these two poles of God's character and understand it very clearly: on the one hand, God is good and loving; on the other hand, God is holy and just. It makes sense, in the sense that it fits with the reality we have experienced – we have probably all known people like this, kind and gentle one day, harsh and unforgiving another.

Faced with this picture of a God being pulled between kindness and justice, and faced with our inability to explain the story in terms which make any sense, many people suspect that salvation for the Christian depends partly on being good (not antagonising Him unnecessarily) and partly on luck (whether the loving bit or the wrathful bit will be uppermost on the day you get to face Him).

Now, I know that is not what we actually say. But, given the confusing nature of the message we often give them (such as, "God loves you so much that He had to kill His own Son"), it is not surprising that they sometimes take away a message which mostly makes sense to them.

Of course, people outside the church understand our message in other ways too, but none of the alternatives are much better. If you think I'm exaggerating, try asking a few people outside the church to tell you what the basic Christian message is, and try not to interrupt when they start to get it wrong.

The Bible does talk about God's wrath, even if it does not feature quite as prominently as most people think – the gory and bloodthirsty passages do tend to stick in our memories – so what are we supposed to make of it?

We don't have space for a full exploration of the subject, in part because the issues in most of the Old Testament are really quite complex: after all, if you are going to establish a covenant with an earthly nation, a people with laws and borders, you probably need to ensure that they have a place to live and they don't get wiped off the

16 Francis Chan, *Erasing Hell*, Appendix: Frequently Asked Questions, Question 7.

17 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Wrath of God*, <http://articles.ochristian.com/article4315.shtml>.

map by the surrounding nations.

But in the New Testament, things are much simpler: Jesus' kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36), so his followers do not fight. We still see God's wrath, but it is clearly placed in the context of God as our loving Heavenly Father. And, in this context, anger and wrath make perfect sense.

It is a deep mistake to see God's justice and wrath as being opposed to His love and kindness. God *is* love. His justice and wrath are an expression of His love, just as much as His kindness and mercy are.

When my children were young, I was deeply aware of how vulnerable they were; and when I discovered that someone was hurting one of my children, I got angry. The Bible shows us a God Who loves us so much that He gets angry with everything that harms His children. He hates sin, because sin harms us – sin causes us pain, and prevents us from becoming all that we could be.

Those who reject God will face eternal destruction, but we have to understand what is happening here: God does not destroy these people because He hates them, but because He loves them – He loves them so much that He gives them the freedom to utterly reject Him.

8.e. Countering extremism

Possibly the most disturbing example of the way the doctrine of eternal torment can change our lives is the way it can be used to justify violent extremism.

Please be clear: I am not suggesting my fellow evangelicals are fanatical extremists. But I think we need to recognise that the doctrine of eternal torment is one which naturally (and, some would argue, inevitably) plays into the hands of violent extremists and fanatics.

The point, I think, is fairly obvious. Suffering unspeakable torment for all eternity in Hell is the worst possible fate anyone could possibly face. So *anything* you can do to prevent this from happening, anything you can do to make it less likely, must be justified – it must be a good idea. It must be right.

After all, this is pretty much what Jesus seems to tell us.

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell (Matthew 5:29-30).

But this is not what Jesus is actually saying. If it were that simple, the choice would be clear. But plucking out your eye, or cutting off your hand, will not prevent you from sinning; maiming yourself will not in any way protect you from Hell. If it did, the choice would be worth it – but it doesn't.

And that is the point Jesus is making here. It is really, really important that you avoid Hell: do whatever you can to ensure you do not end up there; but you will have to find a better strategy than simply cutting away parts of your body – go down that route, and you will find you don't have much left.

In any case, it is not your right eye which causes you to stumble – or your left, for that matter. Jesus makes it quite clear that it is what comes out of the heart that makes us unclean (Matthew 15:8).

Also, it is important to note that Jesus talks about plucking out *your own eye*. He says nothing about plucking out an eye from someone else. So you can't use Jesus' words to justify hurting others, even if your intention is to save them from Hell.

But people don't need a quote from Jesus to justify hurting others. If you believe in Hell-fire, then it makes complete sense to burn heretics alive: it probably will not save them; but if there is even the slightest chance it might, it is worth taking. If they are destined anyway for eternal fire, it makes no difference if the fire lasts for an extra few minutes; and maybe someone else will see the heretic suffer, take the warning, repent and be saved from the eternal flames. If you believe in Hell-fire, burning heretics can be justified.

Again, I am not saying my fellow evangelicals *do* justify burning heretics. But if you have that theology, such an activity makes sense. After all, you are only following the example (or what you *think* is the example) of your Father in Heaven.

If you believe that God torments the wicked, then tormenting the wicked – however you choose to define the term 'wicked' – must be an acceptable thing to do.

It is hard to avoid seeing a connection between fundamentalists and religious extremists believing that God chooses to inflict suffering on people, and these same people believing that it is acceptable for them to inflict suffering on other people – as long as it's in a good cause, of course.

On the other hand, if you really believe that God loves everyone, and expresses this love in the way He treats us, then following Him must surely mean you will seek to avoid hurting anyone if you can.

According to Jesus, you can tell a lot about a tree by looking at its fruit (Matthew 7:16). When you see the fruit of the doctrine of eternal torment, you have another reason to take this subject seriously, another reason why it is worth investing some of our time and mental effort to get our theology straight here.

Helping people to avoid violent extremism is one benefit of sound doctrine, but that makes it sound rather academic and remote: we probably don't have a lot of people in our churches contemplating the use of physical violence to encourage the godly and punish the ungodly. Not these days.

But violence comes in many forms, and we do have many people in the Church who believe, quite sincerely, that they know what is right and what other people should do. There are abusive relationships in the Church: if we deny it or pretend otherwise, then such behaviour can continue unchecked.

Sometimes abusive behaviour is simply evil, but all too often, evil actions are justified in the name of the greater good. It is a common observation that most evil is done in the name of good, and it is easy to see how.

If you believe you know what is right for other people, and that they will gain eternal benefit from following what you say, and if you believe that God hurts people

for the greater good, then you can easily justify manipulating people and pressurising them to do as you say, and you can justify hurting them as punishment for disobedience in order to ‘teach them a lesson’.

We may think of religious violence in terms of suicide bombers and burning heretics, but most religious violence happens at a more everyday level: it can be seen when we pressurise people to conform to the way we do things, in what we require of you if you want to really belong to our group (which is, of course, the only group God fully approves of) and the way we exclude people who are not like us – perhaps because they have tattoos and brightly coloured hair, or perhaps because they don’t.

Religious violence can be seen wherever keeping the rules is more important than loving and accepting people, wherever belonging is determined by social norms, wherever social disapproval is used as a weapon to control others.

I believe that pastoral care can best be understood as a way of helping people discover the freedom they have in Christ, of helping them discover how to fully live. But it can be used as a means of control, a way of ensuring that people conform and obey. If we believe that God controls people by the threat of violence, it must be hard to prevent that belief from seeping into the way we seek to follow Him together.

This ‘control mindset’ is not limited to those with official roles: you don’t have to be a Pastor or Homegroup Leader to fall victim to this approach – anyone who interacts with other people can use it; we are all capable of using small cruelties to punish the people around us when they do not behave as they should; and we are all capable of justifying it as a way of teaching them a lesson and encouraging them to do better in future. But I believe the more clearly we see the character of our loving Heavenly Father, and the more strongly we desire to be like Him, the harder it becomes to justify such behaviour to ourselves.

Our Father in Heaven gives us the freedom to choose, the freedom to choose either to love Him or to reject Him, even the freedom to choose to act in ways which harm ourselves and others. Our freedom is incredibly precious to Him. He commands, but we are free to obey or disobey, and the only threat is that we will receive what we have chosen. Do we model this freedom in our corporate life and pastoral care?

8.f. Love for the lost

The doctrine of conditional immortality does not resolve all our difficulties. When those we love die without giving any indication that they have chosen life, it is heartbreaking. What can we say to those who have been left behind to mourn a loved one? I have just a few quick thoughts on the subject: this is not advice on pastoral care of the bereaved, but may feed into the pastoral care we provide, and some people might find them helpful.

We are not God. The starting point, of course, is that we are not God; we do not know what is in the depths of another person’s heart, no matter how well we may believe we know them; and we do not know the extent of God’s mercy and grace. We may not have been given reason to believe the loved one has responded to God’s love, but we cannot say for certain that they have not. In the end, we have to leave our loved one in God’s hands.

This may be true, but for most people it will probably be unsatisfying; here are a few other points which might be more helpful.

We do not want them to suffer. If we love someone, then we do not want to see them suffer. So the Biblical doctrine of conditional immortality is far, far better than the traditional doctrine of eternal torment. There is comfort in the thought: even if they are lost, at least, they are not suffering.

We are not alone. The sorrow we experience is shared by God. However much we may love the one who has died, He has loved them far more. However well and however long we knew them and loved them, He knew them and loved them far longer and much more intimately.

We have been living with sorrow. Our sadness at the loved one's refusal to receive God's love is only a continuation of the sadness we had already been living with, believing that they have been rejecting God's love and refusing to embrace life to the full. It is hard to watch someone you love reject what they need.

Death brings release. We are also sad because there is no longer hope that we will see them turn around and receive the love being offered. But there can be pain in hope, as Brian Stimpson (the character played by John Cleese) expresses so nicely in *Clockwise*.

It's not the despair, Laura. I can take the despair. It's the hope I can't stand.¹⁸

The end of hope also means the end of the pain of continual disappointment. King David fasted while his child with Bathsheba was sick, but washed, worshipped and ate when the child died (2 Samuel 12:15-23). The end brings sadness, but it also brings release.

Let us look again at the problem we are facing. The possibility that someone we love may be missing from Heaven seems to be a problem in two quite different ways. It is a problem because someone we love may be missing; it is also a problem because this means Heaven may not be what we want it to be.

Here is a confession: I have been attending church services almost every week for some five decades, and I do not think I have heard a single sermon about Heaven. There have been the occasional fleeting reference to people going to Heaven, but that is about as far as it has ever gone. Yet the people I talk with – both inside the church and outside it – often have very clear and fixed expectations about Heaven.

People pick up beliefs about Heaven from the culture around them, just as they pick up beliefs about Hell; and just as with Hell, if the church fails to clearly teach people what the Bible says, they will end up believing something else – either what they have gleaned by inference from the general culture or read in some random magazine articles, or maybe through their rejection of some randomly-chosen idea they have come across. But, whatever they believe, if they believe in any sort of Heaven, then they inevitably believe it will be a place of pleasure and fulfilment.

I sometimes upset people when I talk about Heaven, because the things I read in the Bible about Heaven don't match their expectations: they feel I am somehow

18 *Clockwise* (1986), directed by Christopher Morahan, written by Michael Frayn.

taking away from them the wonderful future they have been promised.

Don't get me wrong: I am confident that Heaven will be a wonderful place; I'm looking forward to it when my work here is done. But, when I talk with people, it seems that the Biblical expectation of joy in the presence of our God and continued opportunities for service (Matthew 25:23) is often turned into a far more basic and self-centred expectation of pleasure; it is seen as a reward for being good and denying myself pleasure down here on Earth.

When I talk with people about Heaven, it seems they are often expecting that God will somehow reward them by fulfilling all their hopes and dreams. If someone says, "It will not be Heaven without [this person]," what they are actually saying is, "I am defining what Heaven will be, and it will be about me getting what I want."

While we can reasonably anticipate some form of party or feast – this is one of the Biblical strands of teaching about Heaven – the Bible does not tell us to expect that Heaven will be one massive party where I finally get everything I want, and get to keep it for ever more. The Biblical promise is one of fellowship, not selfishness.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, we practice sacrificial love and dying to self because they open the door to true love, true life and true relationships; seeking my own pleasure or fulfilment, on the other hand, feeds selfishness and leads to alienation from others, conflict and death. We are called to build Heaven right here on Earth, and the Heaven we build will be the Heaven we inhabit.

My expectation is that, in the end, God will prove to be far more kind and forgiving than we expect – but, whoever we find joining us in Heaven, the bottom line is that it will not be about us getting what we want: it will be about us getting what we need, which is not the same thing at all. Salvation, and Heaven as a consequence, is all about Him.

While we can fully understand the feeling of someone who says that Heaven will not be Heaven without ... whoever or whatever ... the truth is that this kind of thinking is not supported by scripture and may prove to be dangerously misleading if taken seriously.

There is one other point to make here, which will probably make me sound like a dreadful person. I suspect the problem we are talking about here is, at least in part, more imagined than real, encountered more often in books and films than in real life.

We are familiar with people saying things like, "I don't want to go to Heaven if [the loved one] is not going to be there" or they say to the loved one, "You complete me; I can't live without you." Feeling that way is perfectly understandable, but the truth is: it is only a feeling – and, like all feelings, it too will pass.

Everyone we know and everyone we love affects us: they shape who we are and help to mould what we become. But the idea that there is one special person, a soul-mate who we were made to be with, is pure fiction. (Actually, it's not: the one special person we were made to be with is God; He is the One Who completes us, Who fills the empty space in our soul; but that is not what we are talking about here.)

Many love stories only make sense if we believe that these two people are made for each other, destined to be together; the only thing which really matters in the story

is that the right people end up together. The tension may be experienced by the two characters who love each other but can't be together, or by the readers or audience who recognise that these two people are meant to be together even when the characters themselves are frustratingly unaware of this.

Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy because the only way the lovers can end up together is through dying. As a story it is deeply moving; but we know in real life, if they had survived, the teenage hormones would have calmed down after a month or two, they would have come to terms with the fact they could not marry, found other partners, would probably have had long and happy marriages, and the youthful infatuation would have faded to the back of their memory.

The love story is just that – a story. The idea of 'star-crossed lovers', two people destined to be together but kept apart by dark forces, drives the story, just as slaying the monster or finding the treasure might drive the hero's quest, but that is just a narrative necessity. Real life doesn't operate that way, and we have serious problems if we start to think it does.

People may genuinely believe that Heaven cannot be Heaven for me without this person, and it sounds terribly romantic; it may feel true, but it is a lie. It is a good thing to love your partner deeply; but, if you cannot contemplate life without them, then they have taken the place in your life which should be reserved for God. This may work for Hollywood films, but in real life nobody can successfully take the place of God in your life, no attempt to do so will last for long, and any attempt is bound to be a disaster. No-one can take His place.

People do sometimes reach a place where they feel they cannot live without the object of their affections; they do sometimes commit suicide because they cannot be with the person they love. But this is a deep (and genuinely tragic) mistake: true love is not about needing but about giving; if you love someone, you may want to have them with you, but you will want the best for them even more, and you will want them to be free, whether that means they are with you or not. This is how God loves us, and this is how we truly love one another.

Whatever we may feel at the time, we *can* bear the loss of a loved one. It is right to feel grief, to suffer the pain of loss – if there is no pain when someone dies, they cannot have been important to you. It may feel that life has come to an end, but life continues; for a healthy person, the pain of loss subsides with time (and we will all be healthy in Heaven); and some learn to love again, discovering that this is possible without denying the love they had for the one who is lost, and without feeling they are being unfaithful.

However, there is a vast difference between losing someone you love and having them taken away to be tortured. Romeo can reasonably be expected to come to terms with Juliet dying or even, after a while, with her getting happily married to someone else. In either case, the memory of Juliet can fade into the past. But tell Romeo that Juliet is being kept alive in torment, and that memory is just not going to fade. How could it?

If eternal torment is true, those you have loved who are not with you, they will be suffering unspeakable agony every moment you spend in Heaven; how can you rest in

such circumstances, let alone enjoy yourself? But if conditional immortality is true, then those people will only be a part of your past, an increasingly distant past. And if they never chose to embrace life, then in a sense they always were just that – a part of your past; even when you were with them, they were never a part of your future.

I have just one further thought which may be helpful. It is pure speculation: I can't think of anything that backs it up, but bear with me. When you lose someone you love, the pain eventually fades into the past – as long as you have been able to let go. We see this very clearly when children are lost: if a child dies, the parents suffer terribly, but life eventually goes on; but if a child is abducted and not found, there is no letting go, no closure, and the pain continues, for years and decades, unchanged.

When we lose someone we love, we need to be able to say goodbye, to own and embrace the pain before we can let them – and the pain – go. And we are told that when the Son of Man comes, all the nations will be gathered before Him (Matthew 25:31-32): one day, the entire human race will stand before the judgement seat of Christ. We will all be there together.

I'm not asking you to throw away the image of a massive courtroom and think of it instead as a wonderful family reunion; but I am pretty confident that, whatever our expectations are of the event, the reality will prove to be very different. And if we will all be together in one place, then there is at least the possibility that we may be able to say a final farewell. I imagine that most of us will not need to say goodbye in this way, but, for those of us who do, it is at least possible that the Father Who loves us so much will manage to provide us with whatever we need to let go of the lost loved one in a healthy way. He understands our needs, all of them.

This is a particularly difficult area, in a book about a topic which was difficult to begin with, and anything we can say here will be dreadfully inadequate. But we can be sure that the God Who provides so wonderfully for our needs in every other way, Who gives us sunshine and food and companionship, Who removes our guilt and calms our fear, will ensure just as carefully that all our emotional and psychological needs are met. We may not understand how, but we don't need to understand the details if we trust Him the way He deserves.

When we are with someone who is grieving for a dead loved one who they suspect is spiritually lost, we cannot with integrity promise that their loved one will be with them in Heaven. In all probability, what they need most is someone to be with them and cry with them; they need human contact, not academic doctrine. But if they press for a theological response, and it is appropriate to respond, we can confidently say that either they will one day be reunited, or else they were never really united at the deepest level. Loving someone really does mean sometimes you have to let them go.

8.g. Good news, good God

Once we reject the unbiblical notion of eternal torment, we can talk with integrity and love about our Heavenly Father.

In abusive relationships, the dominant figure is generally very tender and loving – all the time the other party does what they want; but when this is not the case, they become harsh and inflict cruel punishment, which is always presented as being necessary and in the other person's best interests.

If this is also the character of the God we worship, no wonder many of us struggle to invite others to join us.

When Jesus was being crucified, He prayed for those who were tormenting Him.

Father, forgive them (Luke 23:34)

So how are we to understand this? Is this a wonderful, astonishing, inspiring expression of God's character, shown in even the most dreadful of circumstances? Or is it a cry of desperation and failure: I want you to forgive them, but I know that you are going to torment them for all eternity, whatever I say?

Jesus prays for the people crucifying Him to be forgiven, but most Christians believe His prayer was not answered – while still believing that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, which must include those who were crucifying Him. There seems to be a bit of a contradiction here.

But there is no actual contradiction, if you simply follow what the Bible tells us: your sins have been forgiven, whether you believe this or not. Hell is not the punishment for those whose sins have not been forgiven; it is the choice of those who reject God and do not want to live in relationship with Him. (This line of thought is expanded in Appendix 2, 'Salvation'.)

The good news is that God is love, just as John tells us (1 John 4:16). He loves us so much, He does not force His love upon us, He does not force Himself upon us against our will. We are free to love Him, or reject Him; but whatever we do, He continues to love us right to the end.

To use the language we find in the synoptic Gospels: the good news is that the Kingdom of God is coming; in fact, it is here already, and you can be a part of it. You can belong to this new Kingdom and help to make it a reality in this world and in the lives of the people you meet. Things are done very differently in God's Kingdom, but you can belong to it, you can be a part of it here and now. You have a choice: you can belong to the coming Kingdom; or you can remain rooted in this world, the current Kingdom, which is on its way out.

But it comes down to the same thing in the end: embrace God, embrace love, embrace this new life; or reject life, love and God. You get to choose, and God loves you so much He will honour your choice.

8.h. The undiscovered country

Death ought to be one of the church's strong selling points.

In a society where death is the final taboo, Christians are the one group of people who ought to be able to face death honestly and talk about it sensitively. But we don't.

From murder mysteries and crime dramas to blockbuster action films and romantic weepies, our films, TV and books are full of death. But in real life, we banish it to a

spartan hospital ward and seek to ensure our children never see a dead relative. We often exclude children from funerals because we tell ourselves, “They wouldn’t be able to cope,” when it is we who cannot cope with their honest responses and questions.

People have always been disturbed by death; when we do not completely ignore it, we may well identify with the feeling which Hamlet neatly articulates:

the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will¹⁹

But we all encounter death, despite our best efforts to banish it. Parents and friends, relatives and spouses die; and one day too maybe even we will die.

For the Christian, life is the ultimate gift from God, but death is not the end. We have the opportunity to live for Christ and in Christ, to build a relationship with our loving Heavenly Father in this life which will last into the next one, and then to be with Him and with the rest of our family in our ultimate home.

Even for Christians, it is not an easy subject: to be with Christ is good, but to remain here for a time is more important (Philippians 1:23-24). But, like Paul, we can talk about it – we have an intellectual framework and an emotional context.

So what stops us? Why do even Christians cross the road to avoid talking to a recently bereaved friend?

Of course, we are troubled by all the usual issues. It is not easy being with someone who is in pain. The emotions are strong and rapidly shifting, so we worry we don’t know the ‘right thing’ to say, and the English don’t really talk about emotions anyway. But, despite all this, given what we believe, we ought to be better at this than most people.

Maybe part of the problem is that we feel we ought to be able to talk about death and dying, but know we can’t do it easily and feel guilty as a result. I suspect one significant factor getting in the way is that we, as a group, are traumatised by what we know (or what we *think* we know, or what we think we *ought to believe*) about what happens to people after death.

I believe the doctrine of eternal torment taints all thought of the afterlife for many loving and faithful Christians. How can we talk comfortably about eternal bliss, when we believe that so many others will be suffering eternal torment? It doesn’t seem right.

Of all people, Christians should be able to face the prospect of our own death, and help others do the same. The knowledge that our time here is limited ought to spur us to live fully and joyfully, to make the most of the time we have here.

If we can put behind us the trauma (and, quite frankly, the embarrassment) of belief in eternal torment, perhaps we will find it a little easier to live, to live fully and joyfully, and help others to do the same.

19 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*: Act III, scene I.

9. Conclusion

I think we have established that the loving Heavenly Father we learn about from, and meet through, Jesus, is the same God consistently revealed to us throughout the pages of the Bible. This God loves and cares for everyone, wanting the best for everyone and seeking to avoid causing pain and suffering. He is not a monster; He is not a sadist who deliberately chooses to inflict more pain and suffering on the human race than any tyrant in history. We have established this through a careful examination of what the Bible actually says on the subject.

I would like to make, in conclusion, three brief points about our subject, and one very short personal statement.

9.a. The reality of Hell

I have heard people who claim that believing the wicked will be destroyed is a denial or rejection of Hell. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is not a denial of Hell, but an honest recognition of the reality of Hell.

It is a dreadful thing for a person to be consigned to Hell – to be branded a failure, fit only to be burned up like rubbish. Can we begin to appreciate the horror of such a judgement? And can we begin to understand the pain that making such a judgement gives to our loving Heavenly Father?

Our God is the creator and sustainer of the universe. He delights in His creation. Imagine His sorrow when a part of His creation fails so completely that it has to be destroyed.

More than that, He is our loving Father. Imagine His pain when one of His children rejects Him so completely that they want nothing to do with Him, ever. Imagine people turning their back on Him, on all that is good, kind and lovely; turning their back on generosity, forgiveness and joy; holding on to bitterness, revenge and hatred. Hell is dreadfully real, and people are choosing it all the time.

9.b. The reality of judgement

In suggesting that the ultimate punishment is death, not torment, we have to remember the Bible's clear teaching about judgement.

We will all one day come before the Judgement Seat. It is clear from many passages that those who reject God will not simply cease to exist *at the point of bodily death* – the writer of the book of Hebrews says it as clearly as any:

man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement (Hebrews 9:27)

The question we have been addressing here is the fate of the wicked after they have been judged and found guilty.

Whatever the punishment turns out to be, we believe that the ungodly will go to that punishment knowing what it is, knowing that their punishment is just, and knowing they have no justifiable complaint concerning their fate – no matter what their regrets may be. There will be sorrow and anger, we are told; I suspect that most of the anger will be self-directed, for the missed opportunities to respond to God's love.

Maybe after the judgement there will be a time of punishment, of pain before the promised destruction is complete; maybe the knowledge of what they have done, and what they have thrown away will be all the punishment that justice demands. We are not told, and I see no point in speculating; but we do know that God is both just and loving, and one day we will not only believe this but also see it finally being demonstrated. This is important for a number of reasons; here are just two.

Firstly, the Bible frequently talks about judgement, a fact which (in my experience) makes many Christians uncomfortable. But most of us have a deep-seated need to live in a world in which there is justice and judgement: we want the crimes people have committed to be brought into the light, and we want the wicked to be punished.

One of the struggles of modern society is that a world without God is, in the end, a world without ultimate justice, a world in which the wicked often die rich and comfortable, a world in which sin and selfishness provide us with the things we want, and if we are smart we can get away with it. Every crime drama, every detective story, every police procedural, is created to assure us that we live in a world in which crime is punished. But if there is no judgement, there is, in the end, no justice. We may not *like* judgement, but we *need it*.

Secondly, some people object to this teaching about destruction on the grounds that 'it is only what most non-Christians believe anyway.' I don't see why this should be such a problem: after all, most non-Christians believe that water is wet, fire burns and two plus two equals four. But, in this instance at least, what they believe is quite different.

If we only look at the end point, both options are the same: in both cases, you are no more – not only are you dead, but there is nothing of you left; nothing beyond, perhaps, a few fading memories. If we only look at the end point, that is. But most people don't care only about the end point: most people care a great deal about the route we take to get there.

Many non-Christians seem to believe that death is the end: you live, you die, and that is all there is. But, as we have noted, mainstream Christian teaching says that death – *physical* death – is not the end. One day, we will all be resurrected and stand before the throne of God to be judged (Hebrews 9:27). People who have rejected Him in this life will be rejected by Him in the next (Matthew 10:32-33).

The two positions are only the same if you focus on the end point and completely ignore everything else; but this does not reflect how people feel and the way they behave in real life.

After all, you are going to die one day: if only the end point matters, then it makes no difference if someone kills you today. But I don't see it that way; I suspect you don't either – and our legal system certainly doesn't.

In passing, it is worth remembering that, if I'm wrong and death really is the end, I'll never know my mistake; but if death is not the end, if there will be judgement one day, then the question of what happens next will matter more than anything else in the world.²⁰

People can imagine, perhaps, what it must be like to be on trial for your life. But a human court can only take away – at worst – your life. They can only take away from you what you will have to give up in a few years anyway. When you stand before God, you will know His offer of eternal life was real; and you will know that your response to His offer will determine whether you can look forward to eternity ... or not.

From a human court, you may go to the gallows convinced that the jury was mistaken, or perhaps you might attempt a degree of revenge by maintaining your innocence to the end. But when God pronounces judgement, you (and all creation with you) will know that what He says is right.

Whatever we believe about the nature of the punishment the wicked will suffer, we must not ignore the Bible's clear teaching that the punishment will only be inflicted *after* we stand before the Judge of all the Earth and hear His verdict. It is what the Bible teaches us to expect; and, in my experience, the Judgement Seat is a far more believable prospect for most people than the traditional pantomime 'demons-with-pitchforks' they usually hear – or imagine they hear – us talking about.

9.c. The truth of the gospel message

The doctrine of eternal torment distorts the gospel message.

Jesus makes the gospel message abundantly clear, as do Paul and John and many others: we are offered life, the life of the Kingdom, the life of the new age, instead of death and destruction. We are offered true life, life in all its fulness, life which embraces love and giving, life which cares for others more than self, life which builds community and has a purpose.

The distorted gospel message offers people selfish pleasure instead of pain. Of course, we do believe that there is pleasure in Heaven, and pain in destruction; but the offer of pleasure instead of pain is not the Biblical gospel message; and while Heaven, with whatever pleasure it contains, will be without end, the pain of destruction will not.

And what sort of pleasure is it? It consists of enjoying ourselves while living in a universe which is shared by millions of souls suffering unbearable eternal torment. It is a pleasure which makes us forget about (or somehow just not care about) the multitudes of the lost writhing in Hell. In the Bible, God does repeatedly offer us pleasure, joy and delight, but nowhere does He offer us this sort of pleasure.

This doctrine of eternal torment makes the gospel message both hedonistic (I am seeking pleasure instead of pain) and self-centred (I will enjoy myself in Heaven, no matter what anyone is suffering in Hell). Does such a message express the character

20 I did not invent this argument: you may recognise it as a slightly modified version of Pascal's Wager (see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascal's_Wager).

of Jesus as you know Him? This is not the Jesus I recognise in the Bible; this is not the Jesus I know and love.

The Bible teaches us the Sovereign Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23). It does not tell us how He feels about the prospect of them suffering eternal torment, but I think we can guess.

9.d. A personal reflection

I would like to offer you a final personal note.

This short book expresses fairly clearly (I hope) what I believe – and what I believe the Bible teaches – about Hell. It does not even begin to attempt to express what I feel.

In order to communicate clearly, I have needed to talk in cold, rational terms about eternal torment, but what I want to do is to scream at the horror of this idea.

I say: this subject is important; but what I want to do is run through the church shaking people, forcing them to confront this topic: what we believe about God matters! I want to run out into the streets, telling people: we have lied to you about God! He is your loving Heavenly Father, not a sadistic monster! We have allowed you to believe medieval myths instead of telling you wonderful Biblical truth!

This is not some minor, technical detail of Christian theology to which you might devote half a day in Bible College; if you want to understand the character and nature of God (and, in the end, who doesn't?), alongside the doctrine of salvation, it is the single most important issue you will ever face.

If the traditional doctrine of eternal torment is true, and if this is the fate of just one person, then God is responsible for deliberately creating infinitely more human suffering than the worst dictator who ever lived. And, as it seems possible (some would say probable, or even inevitable) that the majority of the human race will go to Hell, this is suffering on a literally incomprehensible scale.

We have enjoyed (if that is the word) a careful, cold and rational discussion of many ideas and Biblical passages. But I don't mind if, under the carefully chosen words, you detect just a hint of what I feel when talking with Christians who embrace (or say they embrace) the doctrine of eternal torment, or when I am talking with people who are not yet Christians who think that the God I am telling them about will inflict unspeakable torment on them if they refuse to accept Him.

I hope, I really hope, that you never meet someone who promises to hurt you if you reject them. I also very much hope that, if you ever do meet such a person, you will run for your life, whatever they offer you. Such a threat would tell you all you need to know about their character. People may have told you that this is what God is like, but it is not the God of the Bible; it is not the God we meet through Peter or Paul or James or John; it is not the God we discover in the person of Jesus.

The God we meet through the pages of the Bible is the God I know and love; this is the God I want to introduce other people to. This God is worth knowing, worth giving your life to, worth trusting: this God is good, kind, loving and gracious; our Heavenly Father, Who only wants the best for each one of us, and loves us so much

that He gives us the freedom to choose Him and choose life, or to turn our backs on Him. Let us tell people about this loving God, and seek to reveal His character through the way we live.

Appendices

1. About this Book

1.a. A personal background

For as long as I can remember, people have told me their stories. It happened as a child, and still continues: friends, acquaintances, strangers on the train. I have always been fascinated to hear about someone's life, their joys and sorrows, successes and failures, hopes and fears. They talk, and pause; I ask a vaguely relevant question, to show that I was listening and am interested; and, nine times out of ten, they are off again.

I have found that most people are very happy to talk about what they believe: they don't often get the chance, so they enjoy the experience and are frequently grateful for the opportunity.

Every life is different, with a texture of its own; every individual is wonderfully unique. But, alongside the differences in the details, I have come to recognise some familiar themes: pride in family, achievements and success, yes; but also regret, guilt, sorrow, and surprisingly often, a longing for God.

This book was born in these conversations. Over and over again, I have heard people express a desire for God; over and over again, this has been quickly followed by a sad confession, along the lines of: "But I could never believe in a God Who torments those who refuse to believe in Him." That is what God is like, as far as they are concerned, and that is the end of the story. Except, sometimes, when it isn't, and the circumstances allow us to open up other possibilities.

In my early days as a Christian, I was hopeless here. I either avoided the subject, or went in to defend the traditional teaching with both guns blazing.

1.b. Why write it this way?

As I said in the Preface, my main purpose in writing this is to offer a popular guide to Hell – what Jesus had to say about it, how Jesus picks up the Old Testament's teaching, and how the disciples who came after Jesus consistently passed on His message.

I want it to be 'popular' in the sense of being accessible and reasonably easy to read; maybe even 'popular' in the sense of reaching a lot of people. A guide is needed, because many Christians who know their Bible well still do not know what it says on the subject: they think it tells us about eternal torment, but it clearly and consistently tells us about destruction. Somehow, this is a surprise to many.

What I am seeking to do here is to describe clearly what, according to the Bible, will happen to the unsaved after death – to offer a picture that is completely faithful to the Biblical text. Beyond that, I would also like to offer something:

- that upholds God’s goodness (as well as His holiness);
- that Christians can believe and live with; and
- that other people today can understand and respond to.

After many years of talking with people about this subject, I have discovered that, most of the time, it is not enough simply to point out what the Bible *says*: all too often, people read what the Bible says, and hear something very different. So we need to unpack what it *means* – this is an area where we have been told for so long that a number of key passages do not mean what they say, that many people now find it hard to hear what those passages do clearly say.

We need to do this for all the significant passages: this is partly to remove any lingering doubt on the subject, and partly because earlier drafts of this work were criticised by a surprising number of people because I had, from their perspective, ignored some key passages. And, to be fair, if we don’t consider all the relevant passages, we can’t be sure that the Bible really is consistent in its teaching here.

I have also discovered that people are very individual in their issues and concerns when it comes to understanding what the Bible teaches about the eternal fate of those who reject God.

A good number of people read the various drafts of this book as it was being prepared, and they generously offered a large amount of wonderfully helpful feedback. Comments on the style turned out to be fairly consistent, there were some common questions and there were some issues which needed to be expanded – but there was surprisingly little agreement on which parts of the content people found to be the most helpful.

Where the feedback included comments on the importance and usefulness of different parts of the material, then, almost without exception, it would say something along the lines of: *this point* is really important and helpful, but *that point* is not needed, it just takes up space and should be removed. And – you are probably ahead of me here – the details which some people thought should be removed turned out to be the most helpful and important parts for others.

So both the content and style have developed in response to the feedback. Arising out of the material, the conversations and the comments, I would like to offer you something which has five qualities which you do not always find in the same work.

- **Personal.** This work has grown out of innumerable conversations I’ve had over the years, some of them deeply personal and moving. It is a difficult subject, and too important to be handled in a cold, impersonal way.
- **Reliable.** I want to offer you something which is clear, accurate and convincing as an unpacking, explanation and exploration of what the Bible really says about Hell. The language may be conversational, but the content should be technically correct and theologically precise.
- **Readable.** Although this aims to be a theologically accurate and complete account of a difficult subject, I am seeking to make it as accessible as possible; so references and technical details – as far as possible – have been kept out of the main text. In places, the content has been summarised to keep the momentum going.

- **Informative.** In order for the work to be useful to many of you, as well as the inevitable references, we have to provide the details of the summarised content and reference material for those of you who want to explore this area more fully. These will be found in the footnotes and appendices: please look them up if you are interested or need more detail; feel free to ignore them if the main text is sufficient for you.
- **Brief.** When you start on this subject, it is very hard to know where to stop. Much of the feedback I have received has been requests for more details about related areas of history and doctrine. But this is about what the Bible *says* and what it *means*, not about theological controversies over the centuries, or the current state of New Testament scholarship. I really want to keep this as readable (and, therefore, short) as possible.

A book is a sort of journey: you start somewhere, end up somewhere, and pick up things along the way. One common theme in the feedback is that, whatever order the material was arranged in, a significant number of people wanted other material to be introduced sooner.

Because we can't cover everything first, you will find a number of cross-references in the text. They have two main functions: if you are concerned about a particular strand of thought and want to explore it straight away, they help you find the place where it is considered in more detail. On the other hand, if you want to continue to follow the main text, they simply say: don't worry about this – we will come to it in due course.

The feedback also revealed another area where different people wanted to use the book in different ways: for some, it is enough simply to show them what the Bible clearly teaches; for others, they want to be able to return to the material and use it in responding to the traditional teaching on Hell. For the first group, the main text should be sufficient; For the second, the Contents should take you to the relevant section fairly easily, and the Biblical Index enables you to look up all the awkward passages others might throw at you.

1.c. Use of language

In this book, you will come across various terms to talk about the people who will end up in 'the other place' – 'ungodly', 'wicked', 'unsaved', 'those who reject God', 'non-Christians', 'unbelievers', and so on. I am not attempting to make any significant distinction between the various options: in using these words, I am simply attempting to reflect, as far as possible, the relevant Biblical use of language. In particular, I am *not* suggesting that all unbelievers are particularly wicked, or more wicked than the believers. We will simply be considering the eternal fate of the unsaved, whatever language is used to describe them.

I was brought up to capitalise references to God: it may look a little old-fashioned, but I talk about 'the God Who' does or says various things. These days, it is mostly a question of personal taste, and I apologise if this is not to your taste.

More importantly, I am painfully aware when talking about God, of sometimes saying that 'He' does *this* or says *that*. The male pronoun used in this way upsets or

frustrates some people, and for that I apologise; other people may manage to write smooth and flowing gender-less prose, but my own attempts to write clear and readable text leads me sometimes to fall back on applying the default masculine gender to the One Who inevitably encompasses both female and male, and probably much more besides.

1.d. Talking about God

There is just one final point to make before we start. I ask you not to confuse *clarity* with *certainty*. For a brief exploration of the difficulty of talking about God and the things beyond our experience, please see the next section. My own way of navigating this difficulty is simple: I always aim to be as clear as possible. Whether you end up agreeing or disagreeing with details of my interpretation of the Bible, you should at least be confident you know what you are agreeing or disagreeing with.

My personal aim is to be both clear and correct – but, of the two, clarity is more important than correctness. If I am clear and right, that's good and probably helpful; if I am clear and wrong, someone should be able to point out the mistake and put me right; but if I'm unclear, it really doesn't matter either way. Of course, in the real world things are not usually that simple; but I think clarity is still a good ideal to aim for.

I aim to be as clear as possible in expressing what the various Biblical writers say to us about Hell. I am as confident as I can be that this is what our Heavenly Father has chosen to reveal to us about this subject; but I am also totally confident that when we finally meet Him face to face, we will discover that the full truth is far more wonderful than we knew, and far more wonderful than we were capable of knowing; what we currently know as truth will be but a pale shadow of the reality we are entering into.

1.e. The difficulty of talking about God

When we talk about God and the things of God, we are talking about mysteries.

We can know Him but, in this life at least, we cannot fully know Him. Just as a five year-old child may know its parents, and know them well, there will still be many aspects of the parents' life the child will not know, understand or even suspect, so too it must surely be with us and our Heavenly Father. I believe the Bible reveals to us truth about God, but it cannot be the whole truth.

We can only work with the truth which has been revealed to us: it is futile to speculate what will become clear when we know even as we are known (1 Corinthians 13:12) – if we could understand it and understanding would be helpful to us, I suspect a loving God would have found a way to let us know. Our knowledge of God is real, but limited to what he has chosen to reveal; so, in handling truth about God, we need to work with humility.

I have a great deal of respect for the *via negativa*: the theological tradition which seeks to describe God in terms of what He is not. It offers a healthy counterpoint to the confident claims of other traditions; and it also helps us be on our guard against confusing *knowledge about* God with *knowing* God. But, like all theological

traditions, it has its limits.

It is the nature of all truth on earth: the more we know, the more we know we don't know. The more we get to know God, the more wonderful and the more mysterious He becomes, and that is how it should be.

I am confident that the details He has chosen to reveal to us are true, as far as they go; but I am also certain that I do not yet understand what he has revealed as fully as I might. People have a number of questions concerning what happens after death and what will happen in the last days; it is possible that, as we grow in our understanding of our Heavenly Father that some of the things which are currently obscure will become much clearer.

At present, the Bible does not seem too clear about the answers to many of our questions – and it seems especially unclear about the timing of various events to come. I do not wish to speculate about these matters; and the answers to these questions do not have a significant impact on the subject we are considering.

The opposite is not the case, however. Once we understand what the Bible teaches us about the fate of those who do not go to Heaven, some of the other questions become much clearer: various parts of Revelation, for example, become much easier to understand as soon as you no longer need to fit a Hell full of tormented souls into your cosmology of the new age.

In any case, like us all, I am on a journey of discovery, and what you read here is an account of one small portion of that journey. I share it with you, partly to affirm and celebrate the goodness of our loving Heavenly Father; and partly – in the knowledge that others will have travelled further – as a way of reaching out to and connecting with fellow travellers on this journey.

2. Salvation

The doctrine of eternal torment has been around in the church for a long time, and many good and intelligent people have believed it. The doctrine has, therefore, become incorporated into mainstream theology, as have the assumptions which underpin it, so an attack on this one ‘small’ doctrine can be seen as an attack on the whole edifice.

One reason why people reject conditional immortality is because they believe that embracing it requires that they reject other key aspects of the Christian faith – this has clearly been taught at times.²¹ It matters to many people that you can have an orthodox theology (some would say, ‘otherwise orthodox’) and still embrace conditional immortality.

There is another reason why people sometimes feel the need to hold on to eternal torment: many Christians understand their salvation primarily as salvation from the fires of Hell. This is not orthodox teaching, but it is a practical consequence of the gospel we generally preach, and the lack of clarity in our evangelistic messages about what we are saved to. If the ‘to’ is unclear, then the ‘from’ has much greater emotional impact, and for many people the most important consequence of salvation is that they no longer face the fires of Hell.

If my Christian life is built upon escaping from eternal torment and I discover that there is no eternal torment to escape from, it is natural to feel confused about the nature of the salvation I thought I had embraced. We need a stronger foundation for Christian living.

You may find what follows helpful, you may reject it, or you may find parts to be interesting and worth following up. I should point out that, whatever you feel about the content of this appendix, the teaching we have found in the Bible about conditional immortality and the character of God depends only on the accuracy of our interpretation of the various Biblical texts, and does not depend at all on what follows here.

My aim here is not to convince you that this is the only possible way to understand the Bible’s teaching about salvation: that would be rather ambitious (not to say, arrogant!) and is not needed. My aim is only to reassure you that it is possible to construct a coherent theology which does not have eternal torment at the heart of it.

Given the lack of teaching about conditional immortality in most of the Church today, you may only be familiar with theologies in which eternal torment makes sense and within which conditional immortality does not easily fit. I simply aim to demonstrate it is possible to construct a coherent theology within which conditional immortality not only fits but reflects and enhances the wider whole.

²¹ John Wenham describes a number of examples of this in his book, *Facing Hell*.

You will appreciate that this can only be a brief sketch: the subject matter deserves, I suspect, a book to itself, but it might go some way towards setting minds to rest on this matter. The task has been done before, probably many times, but I am not aware that an easily readable presentation of this material is readily available at present.

2.a. Relationship

It is vital we get the ‘big picture’ of salvation right, as everything else flows from that.

We are content to tell people that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), but what do they understand by this? I suspect that this is often taken to mean that God wants everybody to be floating in the clouds, dressed in white nighties and playing harps. We may know this is not a Biblical picture, but we don’t often try to replace this with a more Biblical alternative.

In the Bible, salvation is big, important and all-encompassing. I believe that our personal salvation is fundamentally about a loving relationship with the creator God Who wants to be our Heavenly Father. It’s about love not law, relationship not rules. He loves us, He wants the best for us and He wants us to love Him back. But even this wonderful vision dreadfully limits the Biblical scope of salvation.

Firstly, while salvation in the Bible is often seen as personal, it is not presented (as we so often do) as being private or individual. A relationship with God as your loving Father necessitates a relationship with His other children; living as a child of God means living as part of His family.

Furthermore, in the New Testament, ‘save’ (*sozo* in the Greek) can mean to rescue from danger, restore, preserve, heal and make whole. It can refer to our spiritual needs, but it encompasses every aspect of our lives. Full salvation (*sótéria* in the Greek) is not just forgiveness and the promise of Heaven, wonderful though these are, but also restored relationships with family, friends and society, a healthy mind in a healthy body, a purpose in life, and much more.

In the Bible, salvation is not just about me; it is not just about me and God, or even you, me and God: it is about the transformation of the universe. What happens to you and me is one part of a much larger whole, and that larger whole is somehow essentially relational, and linked to what happens to us.

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. (Romans 8:19, NASB)

Aspects of the relationship can be expressed, to some extent, in terms of economics and debt, or law and contracts, or honour and shame, but these are tools, scaffolding, pictures, to help us build a strong, healthy relationship.

Our parents teach us all kinds of rules and principles as we are growing up. The rules are given to help us grow and learn, but life does not consist of following rules; and it certainly does not consist of spending all your time and energies establishing the final, correct and definitive set of rules to follow.

In some Christian circles, faith has become part of the structure, believing certain doctrines has become one of the rules which must be followed. In some Christian

circles, faith has been turned into some kind of strange, mystic tool which enables us to benefit from Jesus' death. It is presented as a vital part of a process which is both spiritual and mechanical at the same time: it provides us with spiritual blessing, just like the right signature on a cheque will cause the bank to provide us with money.

Faith, at a basic level, can be mechanical: I sit in this chair because I believe it will bear my weight, I catch this train because I believe it will take me to my destination. Most of the time in the Bible, faith is not mechanical. Neither is it intellectual and doctrinal, understanding and agreeing with doctrines, creeds and articles of faith; and neither is it mystical, a strange spiritual 'gift' which God bestows on people at random and granting certainty about things we cannot, humanly, be certain about.

In the Bible, faith is primarily personal and relational: it is about trust, which is the only basis for a strong, healthy relationship. When the Bible links faith and salvation, the sort of faith it has in mind is not belief that certain doctrines are true, but trust in Jesus.

We sometimes misunderstand the *description* of faith in Hebrews 11:1 – “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” – and take it to be a *definition*, which has the effect of confusing Biblical faith with mental illness. You might be sure that the CIA are bugging your phone, even though you can't see the evidence (they hide their bugs well!), but that does not make your confidence the sort of faith the writer of the letter to the Hebrews has in mind.

The various aspects of faith are, of course, linked in various ways. If I ask you to do something difficult or dangerous, and I tell you to believe in me, there is an element of 'believe that I know what I'm doing' and 'believe that it's probably going to work out okay' but it is mostly 'trust my character and motives: I would not ask this of you if it was not important.'

When Jesus says, “Believe in me”, He is not saying, “Believe that I am God incarnate, the Second Person of the Trinity,” instead he is saying something much closer to, “Get on board! Trust me enough to join in with what I'm doing, become part of the team.” Faith in the Bible is not something which produces intellectual assent or inner certainty, but something which produces action. “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18) – that is faith.

Even when the language talks about believing a fact or a doctrine, this is often shorthand for something deeper.

If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

The resurrection, for Paul's hearers, was not just an item of doctrine to be believed, not even the most important item of doctrine. Let us consider just two strands of New Testament teaching about the resurrection.

Firstly, if God raised Jesus from the dead, then God has confirmed Jesus' claim to be acting on His behalf and speaking for Him, so Jesus was telling the truth: we have to believe Him, believe what He told us, and act on his instructions. If the resurrection is true, everything else follows. Belief in the resurrection means belief that Jesus was

Who He claimed to be.

And secondly, resurrection is the way our Father works. The resurrected Jesus is ‘the firstfruits of them that sleep’ (1 Corinthians 15:20) because this is what all the followers of Jesus will experience; if we are called to live here and now in the reality that is to come, then we are called to live resurrection lives, impossible though that may seem to be on a human level.

The whole point is that resurrection is impossible – impossible to us, but not to God. Following Jesus means I have to become a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), I have to embrace death in many ways, death to my plans, death to my hopes and dreams, maybe even physical death, but it is only in dying that we find eternal life. Belief in the resurrection shapes the life I live in following Jesus, just as much as it shaped His own life.

2.b. Event and process

We inevitably want to know: who will go to Heaven, and why? Frustratingly, the Bible does not tell us – not in any simple, straightforward way; it seems to give a number of different answers in various places. Part of our problem in understanding the Bible’s teaching on the subject is that we have a very narrow understanding of salvation – we often think we are talking about salvation when we are only considering one small part of it.

As we have noted, in the New Testament, salvation is about much more than going to Heaven: it covers health, welfare, prosperity, deliverance, preservation, salvation and safety. So salvation in the Bible is a much larger, all-encompassing concept than the limited thing we focus much of our attention on.

Simplifying horribly, the Bible talks about salvation as both an event and a process: evangelicals typically focus so much on the event that they can easily ignore the process; and liberals, when they talk about it, often focus so much on the process that they can easily ignore the event. In the Bible, both are vital.

The salvation event is described in many ways. We have been born again, adopted into the family of God, rescued, redeemed, ransomed and restored, forgiven, set free from bondage to sin and released from captivity in Egypt; we have entered the Kingdom of God; we are a new creation, we have the gift of eternal life and because we have been saved we can look forward to joining our brothers and sisters in Heaven when we die.

The salvation process is also described in many ways. We are being sanctified and transformed into the image of Christ; we are to follow Jesus, abide in Him, imitate Him, join His mission, obey His commands, do His work; we are to bear fruit, grow and become mature; we are called to be and to make disciples, people who are learning and growing.

2.c. The traditional model of the salvation event

The traditional evangelical model of the salvation event says that the only thing which really matters is going to Heaven when you die, which will only happen if you

explicitly choose to put your faith in Jesus. It says that everyone will go to Hell unless they acknowledge their sins, believe that Jesus died (in their place) for their sins, ask Him to forgive their sins and receive His gift of salvation.

You can easily find this kind of teaching in evangelical books and sermons. At times, it is explicit; and at times it is implicit, in passages such as the following.

[The Bible] teaches that the so-called “light” we’ve all been given through creation, what theologians call general revelation, is sufficient to condemn but not sufficient to save.²²

This raises all kinds of difficulties – most importantly, what if you cannot put your faith in Jesus?

- What of those who have not heard? If only those who know about Jesus can be saved, most people throughout most of history were given no chance.
- What of people who lived before Jesus? Was there a different set of rules in place, and if so, what?
- What of the Jews? Were those who lived before Jesus saved, and if so, how? What of those who lived at the time of Jesus but never got to meet or hear of Him – are they automatically lost?
- What about babies who die? Or young children who can’t understand what sin is, let alone their need to be forgiven for it? Or people with learning difficulties?
- What level of theological understanding is required for salvation? What depth of understanding of the nature of sin, the fact that you are a sinner and the doctrine of substitutionary atonement²³ are needed before you can be saved?

And then there are the difficulties of reconciling the evangelical model of salvation with other aspects of the Bible’s teaching. Take, for example, the question of how many people will be saved: is it many, or just a few?

Jesus describes the situation quite plainly.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

But He also tells us that “many will come” (Matthew 8:11) and commands us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and John seems to be telling us something quite different when he describes the scene in Heaven.

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9)

Are we supposed to understand that our disciple-making will be largely

22 Francis Chan, *Erasing Hell*, in question 5 of the Frequently Asked Questions.

23 Substitutionary atonement has a prominent place in much evangelical thinking, but is only one of the ways in which the Church has understood how Jesus’ death on the cross opens the path of salvation for us. See *Did God Kill Jesus?* by Tony Jones for an excellent overview of this vital subject.

unsuccessful, and the great multitude of the saved will be outnumbered by a much-greater great multitude of the unsaved?

As a second example: it is hard to reconcile the evangelical model of salvation with the New Testament's emphasis on Christian living and discipleship. If the only thing which matters is going to Heaven when you die, and believing that Jesus died for your sins guarantees you a place in Heaven, why do you need to do anything else? Job done! Just sit back and wait for glory!

So there are numerous questions. I'm not saying the traditional evangelical has no answers, but these answers are not easy, straightforward or obvious. This means that questions about the nature of salvation, who is saved and how, are all very difficult to understand – and living accordingly is almost impossible. If I don't understand it, how can I even attempt to do what is best? It is not surprising that many Christians effectively give up on the idea of living out their Christian faith beyond the basic details of attending church and being good people.

Of those who don't give up, many reach the point where they simply accept that these are mysteries beyond our understanding, and we must trust the Holy Spirit to guide us. In the real world, what this means is that I am guided to do some things, and you are guided to do others; we will sometimes be working together and sometimes working in opposition, and because neither of us understand what we are supposed to be doing, we have no way to begin to talk about it beyond the basic "I feel led to do this."

The 'God is leading me' line is not restricted to Pentecostals and Charismatics: I have heard many anti-charismatics argue that "You have to trust me because God is leading me on this matter." But if theology is too difficult, what else can we do?

The traditional model pushes ordinary believers towards giving up – either giving up attempts to live their faith, or giving up attempts to understand it. Fortunately, there is another possibility.

2.d. Another model of the salvation event

I would like to suggest that when we bring together all the various strands of the Bible's teaching on the subject, we find it gives us a different model of the salvation event – one which uses many of the same elements as the traditional model, but reverses them.

The traditional evangelical teaches that everyone is damned unless they explicitly choose to put their faith in Jesus, but the Biblical picture is quite the opposite.

- The **good news** is that everyone is saved unless they choose to reject God.
- The **bad news** is that most people, unless they get to know Jesus, choose to reject God.

We believe that God is holy, and must punish sin; but we also believe that He punished sin on the cross – not that this is the only thing which happened on the cross, but it is one clear strand of the Bible's teaching on the subject. We know that all have sinned, but we also know that Jesus died for all our sins.

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for

the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

If Jesus died for our sins, then our sins have been forgiven; if Jesus died for the sins of the world, then the sins of the world have been forgiven. This may sound strange to us, but it is the language of the New Testament.

If we don't like this conclusion, there are really only two alternatives. Either Jesus paid the price for the sins of the unbelievers, but they have to pay the price as well, so God demands payment twice; or Jesus did not die for the unbelievers. It is hard to square either one with the New Testament's teaching. Few people attempt to teach the first, and (in my experience) few people actually believe the second, despite all the hard work many Calvinists have put into explaining and expounding 'limited atonement' (you may recognise it as the 'L' in the traditional five point Calvinist 'TULIP'; if you don't recognise it, just ignore this point).

The usual approach to this problem is to transform the harsh Biblical language of 'payment' into the much cosier language of an 'offer'. Jesus did not, within this framework, actually pay for the sins of unbelievers; instead, He *offered to pay* for their sins, but His offer was refused. Like the guilty man in court who cannot pay the fine, the unbeliever has a friend who offers to pay the fine for him, but he rejects that offer and chooses to suffer the penalty of the law. It's a nice image, but it is not what the Bible actually teaches.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)

Jesus died for all: that is not an offer, or a possibility, but a fact. There *is* a possibility in the picture here, but it is not the possibility that He might have died for some people – it is the possibility that we might respond appropriately to His death. He died for us so that we should live for him; our response is unforced, we are not required to live for Him, but through His death we are enabled to do so.

We, who are saved, were by nature enemies of God. While we were enemies, Jesus died for us (Romans 5:10); His death justified us through His blood and reconciled us to God – all while we were enemies. At this point, we were still enemies of God, but nothing other than our own stubbornness stood in the way of a restored relationship. A relationship, by its very nature, has to be two way.

We have been justified; through Jesus' death, we can leave the court as free people, but we are still free to turn our backs on the God Who loves us so much. We are only saved, fully saved, if we embrace the life He offers, living in relationship with our Heavenly Father.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:9-10)

It was his enemies that he died for – without his death, we would all have been enemies; without His death, even the few who walk the narrow way would have found, at the end, the path to the God they desired to know was closed to them. But

He did die, and the New Testament message could not be much clearer. Jesus died for us all.

And it is, after all, what we tell people in our evangelistic messages: Jesus died for you! We do not say, “Perhaps He died for you” or, “I hope He died for you.” We do not tell them, “If you respond and believe in Him, then He will have died for you.” No, he died for you and He died for me, whether we wanted Him to or not. He died for those of us who love Him, and He died for those who have never heard about Him. He died for us all; and if Jesus died for our sins, then our sins have been forgiven.

Paul tells Timothy we should pray for everyone and especially those in authority so that we may live peaceful and quiet lives.

This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. (1 Timothy 2:3–6)

Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for all people. The ransom has been paid, so there is no barrier keeping us out of Heaven: the gate is open wide. You may choose to turn your back on Him; you may choose to reject His love; if so, then you will perish – not because you have sinned, but because you have refused the life he offers you.

Paul summarises the ministry we have been given in this simple message:

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Corinthians 5:19, NASB)

Whether or not you believe, trust and follow Jesus, God does not count your trespasses against you. This sounds like good news to me! The good news that Jesus died for the sins of the world is one of the two main planks upon which the structure of Universalism is built.²⁴ The Universalist argues that because everyone’s sins have been forgiven, everyone will be saved and end up in Heaven. The starting point is sound but the conclusion is mistaken.

The bad news is that most of us reject the light we have received, we reject life and truth and love, and instead choose darkness because our deeds all too often are evil, and darkness is so much more comforting than light when we are ashamed of our actions. Our sins have been forgiven and the gates of Heaven are open to us, but we choose to walk in the other direction. We are invited to the feast, but reject the invitation (Luke 14:15-23). Very few of us have the courage and strength to choose the light, or the determination to find and walk the narrow way.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19)

The good news is that, when we are in Jesus, we don’t need to find the way. Jesus is the way: when he is alive in us, we have the way; when we walk with Him, we don’t need to ask for directions, we simply continue in fellowship and the way opens up before us, all we have to do is walk it.

A quick word of caution is required here: when we talk about the ‘narrow way’ and

²⁴ The other main plank is the doctrine that suffering will end one day, and is addressed in section 5.i, “No more tears”.

the possibility that a few people who have not explicitly been told about Jesus might find it, we need to be careful about where this takes us. What is the nature of the narrow way and the people who find their way along it? It is too easy to populate Heaven with people like us. And the people like us – especially the ones who preach and write books – tend to be respectable (even if they are newly-respectable), upright folk who follow the rules.

The truth is: we are not told about these people. But, nevertheless, when I ask about this, people seem to be pretty clear much of the time: it seems that the people who find their way to Heaven without the help of a church or an evangelist pointing them to Jesus – they are good people, upright citizens. People, for the most part, I suspect, like you and me. I simply ask: is this likely to be the case?

When we look at the people who responded to Jesus – who responded to God made flesh – were they the good, respectable members of their community? A few were, true. But most of them were nothing like the sort of people we would expect. Most of them were nothing like the sort of people we nice, respectable people would generally want to associate with.

Part of the problem, I suspect, is that our idea of good and God's idea are quite different. We tend to be terribly worried about not doing things: I must not sin, I must not be selfish, I must not believe false doctrines. Those things matter, of course, but God seems to be far more interested in what I actually do. When Jesus summaries the law, He does not tell us that we must not lie, cheat and steal; instead, He tells us to love God, our neighbour and ourselves. When Jesus talks about the final judgement (Matthew 25:31-46), the 'goats' are not people who did bad things – they are people who failed to show love.

It seems to me that the person who embraces life and love, even if they make terrible mistakes, is far more likely to be seeking God than the one who shuts themselves away from people in a vain attempt to avoid sinning. We find God and relate to Him in the messy chaos of life, not in the sanitised order of the tomb: we find Him and He finds us, whether we recognise Him at the time, or not.

In short, the picture painted for us in the Bible seems to suggest that those who manage to find and walk the narrow way will be those who embrace life, not those who cautiously follow rules.

One of the main points of the Nativity narrative is that Jesus comes – God comes to us – where we would not expect Him, when we are unready, into imperfect circumstances – into a dirty stable and a manger, not a palace. As Richard Rohr points out:

There is no indication in the text that Jesus demanded ideal stable conditions; in fact, you could say that the specific meaning of his birth in a "manger" is making the opposite point.²⁵

My life does not need to be perfect, or even good in the traditional sense, for God to come and meet me; I simply need to know I need Him and make space for Him. The older brother followed the rules all the time, but it was the younger brother, wasteful and sinful, who was embraced by their father (Luke 15:11-32).

25 Richard Rohr, *Falling Upwards*, page 14.

In Jesus is the answer to all our deepest needs. When we encounter Jesus, we discover the One Who is the way, the truth and the light, the One Who calls us to walk with Him and Who gives us His Spirit to encourage us, empower us and direct our faltering steps. Without Him, it is so hard to find the way and muster the strength to walk it; with Him, it is wonderfully easy.

This is why evangelism is so important: not because it is impossible for people to find eternal life unless they encounter Jesus, but because it is terribly unlikely that they will, and also because even the best of people without Jesus will not be able to enjoy the delight and security of His love while on the journey. It is hard to find life without Jesus; it is impossible to find abundant life without Him.

2.e. The salvation process

The abundant life Jesus offers us is a part of salvation – part of the process, rather than the event. The salvation event secures our eternal destiny: while this is important, absolutely vital, it is not the whole story.

The New Testament writers never tell us to consider things only from the perspective of our eternal destiny; they never suggest that this is a good, helpful, worthwhile thing to do. However much we may focus on the event, the New Testament is far more interested in the salvation process, how we live here and now: not on salvation as rescue and ransom, but on salvation as healing and wholeness.

- The **good news** is that as we get to know Jesus and trust Him, we can follow Him and become a part of His mission to redeem the world, to bring about the Kingdom of God; as a child of God and a member of His family, we love and serve Him and love and serve our neighbour; the Holy Spirit guides, empowers and transforms us; and we increasingly experience the joy of knowing Him and knowing we are secure in His love.
- The **bad news** is that, unless you get to know Jesus, you cannot really know what God is like (so you cannot fully live), and you cannot know what Jesus has accomplished for you (so you cannot know you are saved).

All the way through the Bible, we are taught that obedience produces blessing. It is vitally important that we understand this. God is not a disciplinarian, Who demands our obedience and bribes us with rewards if we will do what He says: He is a loving Heavenly Father, Who wants the best for us, Who wants us to enjoy all the blessings we can get, Who knows how we can fully enjoy those blessings, and Who tells us what we need to know.

The full salvation Jesus offers us is about living in the goodness of what God has for us, and sharing it with others: love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself; but there are lots of ways to have less than the full experience. As with many things in life, you get out what you put in: if you are half-hearted about living your faith, you will only be partly enjoying the benefits. You may have been given a piano as a free gift, but if you really want to enjoy it to the full, you have to sit down and practice. You have to express love in practical ways.

Our God is not mean, rationing out the good things he has to offer, denying people His blessings unless they put in the work He demands; the wonderful, astonishing

truth is that He generously pours out His blessings on everyone He can. There are blessings which flow from commitment and obedience, but there are also blessings which flow purely from grace.

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:44-45)

He shares the blessings of the Kingdom as widely as possible. Enjoying life and getting to know God are intimately connected: we do not only get to know what God is like through hearing about Him and watching from a distance, we discover what He is like through experience – “Taste and see that the LORD is good”. (Psalm 34:8). God wants His children – all His children, whether they know Him or not – to enjoy all the blessings they can.

So it is possible to have a deep and profound encounter with God over an extended period of time, to have tasted and seen, to have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and have benefited in many direct ways from His goodness – in short, to have benefited in many ways from the blessings of salvation – and yet not be saved.

That is how the whole ‘taste and see’ thing works: we are offered a free taste without commitment. God shares His blessings because he loves to bless us, and without any commitment on our part to sign up for the whole deal.

His blessings are not like a magic potion, transforming a person on the inside whether you understand what you have drunk or not; blessings may reveal Him, they may encourage us, but on their own they do not convert. In fact, some people may confuse the blessings of salvation with salvation itself; they may get disillusioned by experiencing the joy without the substance; they may decide in the end that a real relationship with God gets in the way of the life they want.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. ... Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. (Hebrews 6:4-6,9)

Note that this passage talks about people who have been blessed in many ways, but the writer is convinced that his readers have better things – and the better things accompany salvation. So, despite our expectations, the blessings he lists do not only accompany salvation: you can be blessed in many ways, you can taste the powers of the coming age, and still not be saved.

When you think about it, this is actually what we would expect. It doesn't really matter what your motives are – nobody can see them, anyway – if you do the right things, it works. If you are honest, kind and helpful, people will like you and you will enjoy much better relationships and quality of life than you would if you chose to act in ways which were dishonest, unkind and unhelpful. It makes sense. And we also know if you pray, God will often answer your prayer: not because you are good but because he loves you, not because you deserve it, but because he is gracious.

We do not get blessed by *believing* the right things: we get blessed by *doing* the right things – by loving God, by loving our neighbour, by loving ourselves ... and by asking for help when we need it. We think that God cares a lot about what we believe and what we do in church, but He cares more about what we do, and about the world. What we believe matters because it affects the way we live, the way we love. What we do in church matters because it spills out – it ought to spill out – into what we do with the rest of our lives.

Loving our neighbour involves personal, private acts of kindness and love; it involves working together to love the people around us in a structured, systematic and efficient way; and it involves working to change the systems and structures which harm people and damage the environment. We may call these activities kindness, social action and politics, but it is all, at heart, simply loving our neighbour as best we can, in all the ways we can.

We cannot live happy, fulfilled but purposeless lives: it is just not possible. We need a purpose in life, we need to know it and be working towards it. The Bible talks about our purpose in many places, including this familiar passage.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

As saved people, we turn from being the enemies to God into His friends, from fighting Him to working with Him, from resisting His will to bringing His will into being. We have been created for a purpose, that purpose is to do good works, and fundamentally the working out of our salvation, the process aspect of our salvation, is about doing good to all people, just like Jesus did. Sound doctrine matters, but we were created to do good works, not to believe good doctrines. To put it another way, we cannot have a loving relationship with our Heavenly Father if we turn our back on loving relationships with the children He created and continues to love.

It seems to me that many Christians are working with a limited and distorted understanding of salvation, and this causes problems in their faith and life. If we understand salvation primarily as living in a loving relationship with your Heavenly Father, and if we recognise that He is present in everyone we meet, then many of the details we often struggle with cease to be a problem.

If we understand salvation primarily as a financial or legal transaction, then we can get tied up with the rules and procedures: what happens, when and under what conditions. It can get very complicated. But a relationship is discovered as we live it, it is something we grow into, something which changes and develops as we change and grow, and there is a wonderful simplicity in that process.

But if the good news is that everyone is saved unless they choose to reject God, and if salvation includes the gift of eternal life, does this mean that everyone has been given eternal life? Clearly, this is not what the Bible tells us.

When we say that everyone is saved unless they choose to reject God, we are recognising that God's default setting is to accept people and welcome them in: they will be welcomed into the eternal home unless they really don't want to come in. He loves us, He wants to bless us, He wants us to come in and join Him in joyful fellowship. He is not suspiciously looking for reasons to keep us out, He is not looking for excuses to punish us – and there would be no point because the punishment has already been taken by His Son.

How does this relate to the gift (the act of being given) eternal life? In short, it doesn't – not in a simple way. We are told that when we believe in Jesus, we receive the gift of eternal life. We are not told that if we never explicitly put our trust in Jesus, we will never receive the gift of eternal life: our Father doesn't work that way; He is not looking for reasons to keep us out.

Imagine a human father promising his children on a hot Summer afternoon: if you help me weeding the garden, you will get an ice-cream. Some help, and some don't. Maybe some are sick in bed, or studying for an exam the next day. At the end of the day, all the children get an ice-cream. Those who helped with the weeding not only enjoyed the assurance of an ice-cream at the end of their labours, but they also enjoyed fellowship with their father in the garden all afternoon; and, hopefully, they will not resent their siblings enjoying the treat alongside them. The father never promised that those who did not help would get nothing, and the children who know the character of their father would not expect him to. Jesus told a similar story in Matthew 20:1-16.

We are told that when we believe in Jesus, we receive the gift of eternal life. We are not told what happens if we never believe, perhaps because we never hear; or if we never start to believe because we always believed, perhaps because we grew up in a Christian home. It doesn't matter, because eternal life is a free gift which our loving Heavenly Father gives; He can give His gift to whomever he chooses, and we can be confident that He gives it rightly – to the right people, at the right time.

I'll say that again, because this is something so import and and so familiar that we often miss it: eternal life is a free gift which our loving Heavenly Father gives; He can give His gift to whomever He chooses. In the Bible, He tells us some things about when and how He gives the gift of eternal life, but what He tells us does not limit what he is able to do. What He tells us does not require Him to give (if he had to give, it would not be a gift), and it does not prevent Him from giving even when we don't expect it.

We are touching here on another aspect of the question of Universalism. It seems clear to me that the Bible does not teach Universalism. Depending on your theology, that may be the end of the subject. But, while I reject Universalism (I do not believe it because the Bible does not teach it), I also reject the hard certainties of those who claim to know more than the Bible tells us about the next world, and I worry about those who confidently proclaim that some people are outside the scope of God's grace – I imagine we have all heard, or heard stories about, people who preach that God

hates *this* group, or He cannot forgive people who do *that*.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we always want to know more details, and the Bible does not tell us all that we want to know. The Bible tells us there are “those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature” (2 Peter 2:10) and we want to know what they desire and how to recognise it. The Bible talks about people who reject God, so some teachers satisfy our curiosity (and, perhaps, our blood-lust) by filling in the details and telling us who will go to Hell.

The Bible is very clear about what God wants: He wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) and nobody to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He goes to extraordinary lengths to ensure that everybody can be saved. The Bible does not teach Universalism, but I think we need to recognise that it is entirely in keeping with the loving and gracious character of God as revealed to us in Jesus. Those who reject God in this life cannot rely on being given a ‘second chance’ in the next world, but is it not possible that God may offer a second chance even if He has not promised it? If it turns out that He is even more generous and forgiving than we expected, would that be so great a surprise?

It may be the case that the Bible does not teach Universalism for very good reasons. Having talked with a good number of people over the years who do believe it, the consequences of believing it do not appear to me to be helpful: it leads people to feel that all this talk of salvation does not matter because we all end up saved in the end. But salvation does matter deeply – the Bible is very clear on this point. Both the event and the process are important, and anything which confuses people on this matter is likely to be unhelpful. But I’m not going to start confidently teaching about the limits to God’s grace, because I suspect that however well I know my Bible, He may continue to surprise me with His love and grace.

The salvation process, as described in the Bible, is really important: living in relationship with our Heavenly Father, loving our neighbour, growing as we learn how to do good to those around us – all of this is possible without experiencing a salvation event, a point in time when we start to believe in Jesus.

Some people have a clear conversion experience, when they turn from sin and receive eternal life; for them, it can be a wonderful experience, but some people do not have that experience. Some people die before they reject God, other people come to faith gradually, and a few who never get to hear of Jesus in this life still manage to find the narrow way. Exactly when any of these are granted the gift of eternal life is not spelled out, nor does it need to be. What do I need to know of His dealings with other people?

You and I are called to focus on living and loving and serving, on discovering what it means to live in relationship with the living God. How he relates to other people, and what He does in and with and through them, is between them and Him. Peter was told much the same thing in John 21:22 when walking with Jesus after the resurrection.

2.f. The salvation choice

For those who are able to choose, salvation is a choice; those who are unable to

choose are unable to reject God, so He will not reject them. Of the rest, very few will find God unless they have been introduced to Jesus – but even when you are introduced to Jesus, you have to choose to follow Him, because if you have the choice and you do not choose to follow Jesus, then you choose to reject Him. The threat of Hell is not torment but destruction, and the people who will suffer this destruction are those who choose to reject God.

One obvious question is: does this tie in with our experience? Is it the case that we choose either to embrace or reject God? Objections to this claim come in several forms:

- there are too many gods to choose from;
- we may not be aware that there is a God to choose; and
- our response to God may be more nuanced than a simple ‘for’ or ‘against’.

There are too many gods to choose from. A standard atheist objection is that every religion tells us we have to believe in their god, and promises damnation if we believe in any of the others; but there are thousands of religions²⁶ in the world. Presumably there have been many more which have died out; but, we may also presume, if there is one right religion, then the deity will have a vested interest in ensuring that it does not die out. However, given that there are thousands of religions and, at most, only one can be ‘the right one’, your chances of getting it right and avoiding damnation are as near to zero as makes no difference.

And the problem, as presented to us, is actually far worse: many religions have various competing sects, each of which claims exclusive rights to the truth, and each of which offers the sole means of access to their god. The human race seems to enjoy promising damnation to anyone who does not agree with me; and if we don’t do it in the realm of religion, the chances are high that we will do it in the realm of politics.

Fortunately, however many competing religions we have to choose from, it really doesn’t make any difference. This would be a valid criticism if there were, in fact, thousands of competing gods, each one wholly contradicting the others, each one promising us salvation and only one of them capable of delivering it. But if there is only one God, then the teaching of every religion will bear some relationship to the truth: it is extremely unlikely that any organised religion (or sect) has got it 100% right, or, for that point, that any has got it 100% wrong.

After all, within the Christian faith, we have Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and a few other smaller groups: they can’t all be right. We have Christians who believe that God torments the unsaved for all eternity, those who believe that everyone will in the end be saved, and those who believe that those who reject God in the end will be destroyed: they can’t all be right. But we don’t have to be. None of the mainstream Christian traditions claims that your theology has to be 100% correct in order for you to be saved; none of them claim that salvation is available only to members of their group.

It is arguable that this passage from 2 Corinthians is the central claim of the Christian faith.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their

26 Wikipedia tells us that, according to some estimates, there are roughly 4,200 religions.

trespasses against them (2 Corinthians 5:19, NASB)

If this is true, then how you respond to Jesus matters, and everything else is just a detail. And, if you are not presented with Jesus, then it matters how you respond to that which is of Jesus in the teaching and traditions of the religion or religions you do encounter.

If God really is love, then it follows that any religion which teaches of a god of love is teaching truth about God, and anyone who responds to teaching about a god of love, by whatever name, is responding in some way to that one true God. If God really wants me to love my neighbour, then any religion which teaches its followers to love their neighbour is, to that extent, teaching the truth.

And if the Christian claim is true that God “rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6) then anyone, from whatever religion they belong to, who earnestly seeks God, will be rewarded. At the risk of repeating myself, if Jesus died for the sins of the world, then he died for the sins of people who have never heard of Him, even if they follow other religions.

This is not to argue that all religions lead to God and are therefore essentially the same. The religions of the world are clearly not the same, and I would argue that most religions contain many things which are wrong and harmful to spiritual life and health; but even so, they also contain many things which are good, true and helpful. The important thing is to distinguish between the good and the bad – and, if good and bad really are different, then distinguishing between them can be done.

The various religions and sects differ in their teaching so, on each point, some will be closer to the truth than others. Truth matters; and how we live affects our reward, our blessing. But while bad theology leads to bad living which leads to lack of blessing, bad theology does not mean you are damned: it simply means that you are wrong and missing out on the fullness of life you could be experiencing.

Because Jesus died for our sins, we are saved unless we choose to reject God. It seems to me that if someone rejects a god of hate, then they are not rejecting God, because that is not Him. Rejection of a falsehood cannot be the same as a rejection of the truth.

On the other hand, just because a religion may teach true things about God and about how we should live, that does not mean that a follower of that religion is responding to God and therefore saved. We are not saved because we believe the right things, and we are not saved because we do the right things: we are saved because Jesus died for us to make it possible, and we are saved because we respond to the God Who loves us and Who wants us to love Him in return.

It seems to me that the picture of God painted by most religions would make it very hard for their followers to respond to that God in love, however true some of the doctrines they teach may be. Very hard – but not impossible.

I am not saved by a religion, I am saved by embracing a relationship with the living God and opening up my life to Him; if you want to get to know God, He promises you will succeed, but if you believe lies about Him, it is very unlikely you will want to get to know Him in the first place.

We may not be aware that there is a God to choose. Some people claim that accepting or rejecting God is a choice they have never made: they do not choose to reject God because they are not aware of having been presented with the challenge to accept Him in any meaningful way. They just get on with their lives, and God is never really part of the picture. God, for them, is a children's story, rather like Father Christmas, and impossible to take seriously as an adult in the modern world.

I suspect this claim, when made, is often based on a faulty view of the world, probably resting on the myth of a secular society which much of the Western world has bought into.

The myth says that we live these days in a secular world based on science; a few odd people cling onto comforting religious fables, probably because they were indoctrinated as children, and this is largely acceptable because we allow people to believe what they choose in private as long as it doesn't impact the public realm in any way. In the past, they had religion instead of science, but we know better now.

The truth is almost exactly the opposite. Science is a brilliant, exciting human activity which only functions successfully in a context where faith and morality are working well; moreover, science enables us to build great bridges and cars, but to build a successful life and a flourishing society we need morality, values, purpose and human significance – none of which can be obtained from science.

So the truth is that we all live in a world dominated by spiritual issues, struggles and realities. Throughout history, every society has taken religious faith seriously, even the occasional atheistic ones which find they need to turn political dogma into religious faith and the state into a god. Religion is only the language we use to talk to each other about the things which matter most to us, and the habits and structures we build to help us help each other to hold onto what matters.

The world we live in is spiritual in nature, and even the physical world reveals Him, as Paul reminds us.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)

Note that the wrath of God has been revealed, not against people, but against the godlessness and wickedness of people. God does not hate people: He hates sin, He hates the things which harm and limit and discourage people.

So people encounter God and get to know Him in many ways, whether they are aware of this or not, and whether they use the word 'god' or not. All the important aspects of human life are lived in the spiritual realm, in His company.

Our response to God may be more nuanced than a simple 'for' or 'against'. We claim that people choose to accept or reject Him, but is this fair? From the outside at least, most people seem to rub alongside Him, neither fully embracing nor fully rejecting Him.

However, we don't actually find it possible to be neutral for significant people in our lives. You may neither love nor hate the person who sells you sandwiches at lunchtime, but you can't stay neutral about the people whose lives impact yours: as you get to know them, they tend to become friends; and if they are significant but not friends, you will probably find yourselves in opposition. And, like it or not, God is the most significant person in your life.

At a more abstract level, God is the ultimate reality. We are, each one of us, either seeking to embrace reality or to avoid it. I suspect that the whole 'New Age' movement can be seen as a way of enabling people to reassure one another that it is okay to choose to embrace a comforting fantasy. It is common to hear people saying things like, "I prefer to believe that ..." and the message is clear – don't try to persuade me with the facts, I'm not interested.

I also suspect that most of us will be able to think of people who seem able to face up to reality in some aspects of their lives, but retreat into unreality in other areas: are they living in a grey 'no-man's land' somewhere between reality and fantasy? But nobody lives in complete unreality – nobody we are likely to meet out in public, anyway. It really doesn't matter if we accept the aspects of reality we like – if we reject the aspects of reality we don't like, then we choose to embrace unreality.

This is not intended to be judgemental: if reality, as you understand it, is a universe without God, without morality or purpose, then how many of us are capable of embracing this and living in the light of this 'reality'? And if the only real alternative you see is to believe in a God Who decided to create the majority of the human race in order to torment them for ever more, then I can't blame you if you choose to avoid facing up to this 'reality'. Which is one reason why we need to tell people about Jesus – so that they will understand that reality is something we can live with, because ultimate reality is a Person Who knows us completely and loves us anyway.

Of course, we can choose to embrace reality and still be horribly mistaken – but the difference is, if we desire to know reality, if we desire to know the truth, then when the mistake is pointed out, we change our minds; if we prefer the fantasy, then when the mistake is pointed out, we cling to the familiar lie.

Most importantly, we are told that God is love (1 John 4:8). In our experience, love can easily get twisted into something selfish, manipulative and destructive, but the fact that love can be twisted and misused does not change the nature of true love as it exists in God and as it is known in the person of Jesus.

In the end, love must be accepted or rejected; it must be welcomed, embraced and lived, or turned away, rejected and avoided. We can take up the challenge and accept the risk of discovering what it means to embrace love – love of God, of neighbour, of self – or we can decline the challenge and refuse the risk, choosing to remain with what we think we know and what we can seek to control.

The love we embrace or reject is not a warm, fuzzy feeling, or the thrill of a Hollywood romance; it is the love which says, "I am on your side"; it is a love which desires the very best for the beloved, even if they hurt and reject me; it is a love which seeks to understand their needs and respond to them, visiting when lonely, feeding when hungry, offering help but not imposing it.

It is a love which does good to the unkind and the unlovely, because that is the nature of the life which animates us, and at the end we will be surprised to hear that “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40) because when we try to love a needy person, we may not be aware of God at all, but it is the act of love which matters and not the theological interpretation we place on it.

The love we find in Jesus is one which embraces, through God, the whole human race; it is costly, and impossible to express fully or successfully; living and loving that way is beyond us, but He helps us, we learn and grow and are given strength as we try, and the attempt is all that is asked of us. The central focus of a person’s life is either self-giving or self-getting; my life is either centred on me or on the God I love; love is, in essence, an all-or-nothing thing. We cannot, in the end, sit on the fence.

3. Fair Punishment

I have tried very hard in the main body of this work to focus on examining *what the Bible says* about Hell. If we tried to consider what other people say and all the arguments they have used over the years to support or attack one position or another, this would be a much longer work.

But, in conversations, people keep on raising the question of fair punishment, so we can't just ignore it. It seems that many people need to work through this issue before they can consider the possibility that the Bible means what it says about Hell. So let us consider it briefly.

Over the years, a great deal of time and effort has been spent explaining why eternal torment is a fair punishment. Many people genuinely believe that it is fair, and it is natural for people who believe that eternal torment is fair to conclude that conditional immortality must therefore be unfair.

It seems to me that the truth is precisely the opposite of this – any system of eternal torment must inevitably be unfair, and only conditional immortality has the possibility of being fair.

We are considering the question of fairness because so many people raise it. But please note that this discussion, while it may affect how we feel, has no impact on the main subject – what the Bible actually says about Hell. Even if it can be established that eternal torment would be a fair punishment for sin, this is evidence for eternal torment being *possible*, not evidence for it being *true*. It could be the case (as in, it is logically possible) that eternal torment is a fair punishment, but God chooses not to impose it.

For the sake of brevity, I shall make the following assumptions in the discussion which follows.

- God requires justice: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)
- Justice and fairness are essentially equivalent: a just system will be fair, and a fair system will be just.
- God is just. He does not command us to act justly while behaving differently Himself. So when we consider justice, we are dealing with the character of God, with something fundamental, something which is built into the fabric of the universe, not some minor academic or judicial detail.
- In any just human judicial system, the punishment must fit the crime – it must be appropriate and proportionate to the offence.
- The question before us is the relationship of God's system of punishment with our normal human concept of justice.

This will be, of necessity, a horribly brief treatment of some very deep and important questions, but I hope it will be sufficient for most readers.

3.a. The need for fairness

Most people would recognise that eternal torment seems, at first glance, to be unfair. It raises two obvious problems.

- Firstly, the penalty is **not proportionate** to the offence: a finite amount of sin results in an infinite amount of suffering.
- Secondly, the penalty is **not appropriate** to the offence: whatever sin you have committed, the penalty is always the same – whether it is one small lie or a lifetime of cruelty and mass genocide.

There is a great deal of material available which seeks to explain why eternal torment is both proportionate and appropriate – and people who believe in eternal torment generally believe this to be true. It is important, because otherwise God's justice looks nothing like justice as we understand it.

Aspects of God's justice will, of course, be different from human justice: He knows everything, so He is never uncertain of the facts; He never suffers from self-interest or mixed motives, and can be completely trusted to judge fairly; and so on. But the basics have to be the same, otherwise it makes no sense to use the same word. The Bible teaches that God is just, and that claim has to mean something.

3.b. What God does must be fair

One common argument to support the fairness of eternal torment flows fairly obviously from this starting point: because God is just, what he does must be fair; God sends the unsaved to eternal torment, so eternal torment must be fair.

As a piece of reasoning, this is sound. The precise argument runs as follows:

If (a) everything God does is fair,

and (b) sending the unsaved to eternal torment is one thing God does,

then (c) sending the unsaved to eternal torment is fair.

But, as with any reasoning, the validity of the conclusion depends on the validity of the starting point, and it is precisely the starting point which is in dispute here: is sending the unsaved to eternal torment one of the things which God does?

This line of reasoning cannot tell you that eternal torment is true: it can only tell you that *if* eternal torment is true, *then* it must be fair. But the question of whether it is true – that is the vital point we are seeking to establish.

After all, if you start from God's justice, you can just as easily (and, I suggest, far more plausibly) argue that eternal torment must be false because God is just and eternal torment is unfair.

3.c. God is holy

Another common argument says that eternal torment is both fair and necessary

because God is holy. I have heard evangelistic sermons explain this in agonising detail. You can easily find examples on the Internet – this random example took me less than ten seconds to locate.

All sin is fundamentally sin against God (Psalm 51:40), and He is infinitely holy. Accordingly, sin against an infinitely holy God demands an infinite punishment. The severity of the punishment points to the holiness of God. He is so righteous that the just penalty for offending His holiness is something so horrible as eternal conscious torment. It would actually be unjust for God not to punish sin eternally, because to do so would belittle the value and glory of His worthiness.²⁷

This time, the starting point is fine – at least, I have no need to argue with it right now – but the argument fails.

Let us accept, for the sake of argument, that all sin is fundamentally sin against God, and that God is infinitely holy. Does it therefore follow that all sin demands an infinite punishment? I know that many people believe the conclusion is true, but it is not established by the argument – not unless you add something more.

The conclusion only follows if it is *also* the case that sin against an infinitely holy being demands infinite punishment – but this is almost exactly the point the argument is seeking to establish. Without this assumption, the argument fails; with it, we simply have a clear case of circular reasoning.

If we ignore the argument and simply examine the point in question, we have to ask: is there any evidence to support this belief?

For a start, does the Bible teach us that “sin against an infinitely holy God demands an infinite punishment”? In a word, no. I have heard people claim otherwise, but when we examine the texts they offer to prove the point, it is clear that none of them says this – either on their own, or taken together.

But we can believe things even if the Bible does not explicitly teach them. So – do we believe that sin against a holy person needs to be punished more harshly than sin against a not-so-holy person? Is this a moral principle we recognise and seek to act upon? Are we campaigning for criminal penalties to be adjusted according to the holiness of the victim of the crime? Do we apply this principle anywhere else in our lives? I don't. Do you?

Of course, I am disagreeing with Anselm here. You can read his justification of eternal torment in *Cur Deus Homo* book 1 and *Proslogion* chapters 8-11. But Anselm reasons his case from within the framework of feudal society, not on the basis of Biblical truth; and our understanding of justice has moved on a great deal since his day. Today, we tend to believe that justice should be blind – that it should not matter who committed the crime, or who the victim was.

Sometimes this argument is phrased in terms of ignorance rather than knowledge: we do not know that the punishment (eternal torment) is unfair because we do not know the true extent of the sin. This always seemed to me like an odd argument: it is a bit like suggesting that we should not release someone from prison when it has been

27 Mike Riccardi, ‘Does the Doctrine of Hell Make God Unjust?’
(thecripple.org/does-the-doctrine-of-hell-make-god-unjust/)

proved that they were unfairly convicted, on the basis that we cannot be certain that they have not committed some other crime worthy of imprisonment. This is not the way justice is supposed to operate. But people do continue to make this argument.

The argument that *eternal* punishment is unfair (because there is a disproportion between temporary sin and eternal punishment) wrongly assumes that we know the extent of the evil done when sinners rebel against God.²⁸

To which, I simply reply: no, it assumes nothing of the sort. I can know something is wrong, even if I don't know all the details. If two toddlers in a play group argue about a toy, I don't need to know anything about the incident to know that sending one of them into care on the basis of that one argument is unfair.

Possibly a more relevant illustration: I know that we (in England) used to hang children for stealing bread. I believe this was unfair. If anyone challenges me and suggests I cannot know it is unfair because I don't know how much bread they stole, my response is very simple – I don't care how much they stole. However much bread they stole, and whoever they stole it from, hanging them was wrong.

I can (reasonably and validly) believe something is wrong without knowing all the details. I believe that eternal, infinite punishment for one limited sin is unfair. And, after many, many conversations on the subject, it seems that most other people share my belief.

Eternal torment seems intuitively and obviously unfair. Moreover, the Bible says a great deal about God's justice and His character, and it says a great deal about sin. Given what we know of God and sin and justice, as these things are revealed in the Bible, eternal torment seems unfair. If those who believe in eternal torment would like us to believe otherwise, they need to offer some solid evidence.

And if it is true that we do not know 'the extent of the evil done when sinners rebel against God', then this is only the case because God has chosen not to tell us. Any argument which relies on an assumption about something which God has chosen not to tell us about ... is probably not an argument which need detain us long.

3.d. God's glory demands it

The same argument about God's holiness is also used in relation to many of His other attributes. Yet again, examples of this argument are very easy to find.

Above all, God loves Himself and upholds His glory, and to uphold His glory as infinitely valuable requires that punishment be executed on those who profane, or disgrace, God's glory. Overlooking, or ignoring, sin would communicate that an offense against God was not that big of a deal.²⁹

Remember: we are not suggesting that sin should be ignored – the question is about the appropriate punishment for sin. What we are being told here is that God thinks it is worth tormenting people for all eternity in order to uphold His glory. How does this tie in with what the Bible tells us of God?

28 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 1151.

29 <http://evangelismexperiences.blogspot.co.uk/2008/08/loving-god-must-punish-sin.html>

Is He, fundamentally, a God Who makes us suffer in order to uphold His glory, or a God Who lays aside His glory to suffer and die for us so that we may have the chance of a new life in fellowship with Him? Since we know He laid aside His glory to suffer for us, what makes anyone think that He would choose to make us suffer eternal torment in order to uphold His glory? It would be completely out of character.

The Bible is full of occasions where God surprises us, where our understanding of His character is revealed to be completely mistaken. But that is the point: the Bible contains these revelations. something Such an incredible reversal

3.e. A mathematical interlude

We have been using the words ‘infinite’ and ‘infinity’ to describe both the duration of eternal torment and the amount of suffering produced by it.

If you are turned off by any reference to mathematics, please feel free to skip this section. But you don’t need to understand mathematics to understand the points being made here, you may find it helpful to come at the question from a slightly different angle and some of the absurdity created by the doctrine of eternal torment can perhaps be seen mostly clearly from this perspective.

Zeno of Elea developed some famous paradoxes, which present us with problems created by the concept of infinity.³⁰ Since then, people have been struggling to understand infinity, and it is still a slippery concept. But, thanks to the work of Cantor and others, we have come to understand it much better in recent times.

Here is a brief summary of some of the things we now know about infinity. You can easily verify these points by asking any mathematician.³¹

- Infinity plus one is still infinity.
- Infinity plus any number is still infinity.
- Twice infinity is still infinity.
- Infinity multiplied by any real number is still infinity.
- Despite all this, there are an infinite number of infinities, each one infinitely larger than the previous.

People talk about quantifying suffering. I find this incredibly distasteful, and am not convinced that it can actually be done, but for the sake of the argument let us assume it is possible and meaningful. In which case, it should be clear that any finite amount of suffering extended for an infinite period produces an infinite amount of suffering.

If you take this infinite amount of suffering and add to it another day’s suffering, you still have the same infinite amount of suffering – which, as argued above, provides the moral justification for burning people at the stake.

But, if any finite amount of suffering extended for an infinite period produces an equal infinite amount of suffering, then threatening people with different torments in

30 The wikipedia article (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeno%27s_paradoxes) gives a good overview.

31 Or, of course, they can be checked online. There are a couple of helpful wikipedia articles: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infinity and en.wikipedia.org/wiki/aleph_number.

Hell (as described in loving detail by Dante³² and many others) is pointless: whatever you suffer in Hell, the end result is the same infinite amount of suffering.

I will grant that the different torments carry different emotional weights, but that does not make it good theology. And, if you want to consider the emotional effect, then I am repulsed by every bit of the suffering Dante describes.

I know it is not quite the same, but imagine a judge passing sentence on three people, each convicted of participating in some way in a dreadful crime. The first is locked up for an infinite number of seconds, the second for an infinite number of hours, and the last for an infinite number of years. It may appear that the judge has been more lenient with one and harsher with another, but in reality they all have the same punishment.

If it makes sense to talk about quantities of suffering and infinite duration, then any finite amount of suffering, extended for an infinite period, results in the same infinite amount of suffering. Whatever the sin, however bad it is, the lost soul will suffer exactly the same punishment as every other victim of eternal torment.

It should be clear at this point that the doctrine of eternal torment requires us to believe that *every sin* deserves eternal torment, because you can add together as many finite punishments as you like, you will never reach infinity. You can keep adding (or multiplying, it makes no difference) as many millions and billions as you like, all you have is a very large finite number. If one sin does not demand the punishment of eternal torment, then neither can a billion sins.

It should also be clear that the doctrine of eternal torment threatens everyone with precisely the same punishment. A grumpy postman and Adolf Hitler (assuming neither of them is saved) will suffer exactly the same punishment.

I apologise in advance for going here: the subject is already distasteful enough, but I can't see any way to avoid it. From what we now know about infinity, the only way in which God could vary the amount of suffering produced by an eternity of suffering would be to make the quantity of suffering *at each moment* infinite.

Some preachers claim that this is precisely what God will do to everyone in Hell – as if they could know. If they are right, then we are back with every lost soul enduring the same punishment; if they are wrong, it means that there are two possible levels of punishment in Hell: one which produces ‘just’ an infinite amount of suffering, and one which produces infinitely more. So the grumpy postman and Hitler *could* receive different levels of punishment, but everyone else has to suffer the same amount as one of them or the other.

The point is both absurd and purely academic: nobody seriously suggests that the Bible teaches this, and no significant group of Christians believes it. But this kind of irrelevant absurdity is what happens when we try to take seriously what people teach about eternal torment.

3.f. Eternal torment encourages bad behaviour

Another problem with the concept of eternal torment should now be clear: if every

32 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, book III.

sin demands the punishment of eternal torment, and since (all agree) even the best of us will sin more than once, then most of our sin can never be punished. The first sin reaps the punishment of eternal torment, and from that point onwards there is nothing more God can do to the miserable sinner.

Consequently, the doctrine of eternal torment fails on a key point most of its supporters insist upon: according to this doctrine, it is impossible for all sin to be punished. Only the first sin is punished – after that, every single sin you commit goes completely unpunished.

And it gets worse. The threat of eternal torment creates a ‘perverse incentive’ – as the saying goes: I might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb.

After all, if I am going to suffer eternal torment for what I have already done, I may as well squeeze every bit of selfish pleasure out of this life as I possibly can. It doesn’t matter (to me!) how much I hurt other people – the punishment cannot possibly be increased. And maybe I will be able to repent in time and squeeze into Heaven anyway?

If every sin deserves infinite punishment, infinite in intensity and duration, then it is evidently impossible for each sin to be properly avenged, since any one sin of a damned man will fill his eternal life with infinite suffering and leave no room for any more punishment of his other sins. Moreover, the orthodox doctrine of hell asserts the gradation of torments in proportion to the gravity of the sins; this is impossible if all sins deserve and receive infinite punishment.³³

I suppose that (from a mathematical perspective), given there are an infinite number of infinities, it might be possible for God to inflict a different infinite amount of suffering on everyone. But at this point we are so far from anything the Bible says about punishment, and so far from anything the Bible tells us about the character of God, there is no point in continuing down this road. In any case, it seems to me that nothing which can be said about infinite amounts of suffering can possibly make the threatened outcome appear fair.

3.g. Punishment for what?

Infinity, as we have noted, is a difficult concept. Eternal torment – infinite suffering – cannot be a fair punishment for finite sin; but on the other hand, eternal torment cannot ever be experienced. No matter how long the lost soul spends in torment, they will never reach the point of having experienced eternal torment.

According to Anselm, it is necessary for the damned to suffer infinite punishment, but this will never happen. They will never reach a time when the suffering has been endured for an infinite duration, so the suffering will never be infinite. If God requires an infinite punishment, that requirement will never be met.³⁴

This does not contradict the point that an infinite punishment means that everyone suffers the same: while an actually infinite amount of suffering will never be reached, however much suffering any one individual will have endured at any time, there will

33 Daniel Walker, *The Decline of Hell*, page 43.

34 This point is made in Charles Seymour, *A Theodicy of Hell*, page 53.

come a time when every other lost soul will have endured the same amount of suffering and more.

If everyone in Hell suffers the same punishment, and if the punishment for one small sin is the same as the punishment for many massive sins, it seems clear that – whatever the theologians may say – the sinner is not being punished for their sins, they are not being punished for what they have done: they are being punished for who they are, for being a sinner. Which, as we all know, is not something which any of us had any control over. Whatever they have done, it is completely irrelevant.

In other words, if eternal torment is true, then everyone in Hell is being tormented for who they are, and not for what they have done. And this also is unfair.

I recognise that this is not the usual way we articulate it, but how else can we understand the doctrine of eternal torment? In the English legal system, the accused stands trial before a jury, and the jury decides whether he or she is innocent or guilty; if they are guilty, then the judge who presided over the trial will pass sentence. But, with the doctrine of eternal torment, it is as if a new judge turns up after the trial is over; this new judge knows nothing of the prisoner or the offence, nothing of the harm caused or of any mitigating factors; this judge who only knows that the prisoner has been found guilty, passes sentence. Would we consider this fair? With eternal torment, what you have done is completely irrelevant, the only thing which matters is that you are someone who at some point has done something wrong, so you must be punished.

3.h. Any punishment is inconsistent

Sometimes people suggest that it is inconsistent to accept the reality of divine punishment but reject eternal torment.

The same difficulty in reconciling God's love with eternal punishment would seem to be present in reconciling God's love with the idea of divine punishment at all.³⁵

The idea is often presented, as we see it here, in tentative terms: the author does not wish to tell us the same difficulty *is* present in both situations, only that the same difficulty would *seem to be* present. It is, perhaps, only an apparent difficulty – but we are expected to take it seriously anyway.

I do not recall a single person, from the many conversations over the years, who has claimed this position as their own: it has only ever been presented to me as ‘some people suggest ...’ In face to face conversation, everyone I talk with recognises the essential difference between limited punishment and infinite punishment.

But the suggestion is made, and a response seems to be required. There are two simple responses which spring to mind.

Firstly, we need to recognise that the people being attacked here are Universalists: they are the people who actually argue that God cannot punish sin. Not all Universalists would agree on this point, as many believe that a God of love must punish sin; but some Universalists do believe that any punishment is inconsistent with love, and anyone who believes this must be a Universalist. And we have already

35 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 1151.

established that Universalism and conditional immortality are very different doctrines.

So the reasoning goes something like this: someone who disbelieves in eternal torment must be wrong because there are other people who do not believe in eternal torment and these other people are clearly wrong. This is not a strong argument; it is, of course, not an argument at all. It is equivalent to claiming: I believe that $2 + 2 = 5$, and I must be right because the person who believes that $2 + 2 = 3$ is clearly wrong.

Secondly, we need to remember that God's character and activity are always in agreement, and the Bible contains many examples of people being punished for their sin. (The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 is one obvious example.) There is no reason to suggest that God is capable of punishing sin in this life but incapable of doing it in the next. We must understand God's punishment of sin as an expression of His love: we punish our children *because* we love them, and so too does our Heavenly Father.

However bad the crime, it is hard to see how an infinite amount of suffering can possibly be considered either appropriate or proportionate. All the arguments we use when we explain why this is fair simply have the effect of establishing that justice in God's eyes looks nothing like justice to us.

3.i. *No time*

All the problems with eternal torment arise from the assumption that we are talking about people experiencing suffering which extends forever, suffering which has infinite duration. But we have already seen that the word 'eternal' does not have to be understood in terms of infinite duration.

After they have been presented with some of the problems which arise if we claim that God makes people suffer for an infinite length of time, people who are defending the doctrine of eternal torment often explain that time, as we understand it, will not exist once we get to Heaven or Hell. 'God is beyond time,' they say.

Sometimes the conversation moves on to the Biblical concept of eternity: it is not really about infinite duration, they explain, it is more to do with the nature of the world to come. They often seem disappointed when I whole-heartedly agree with these points.

The conversation often ends around this point: they go away happy, feeling they have established an important theological point. The obvious question, of course, is: if the unbeliever's punishment is not eternal in duration, what happens when it ends?

There are only two possibilities. Either the unbeliever joins the blessed in Heaven, and everyone is saved, so we are back at Universalism by another route (having magicked the doctrine of Purgatory out of thin air); or they don't. If they don't make it to Heaven, again there are probably only two options – either the Biblical teaching of conditional immortality or something like Limbo (another unbiblical doctrine invented in an attempt to square a theological circle).

For the sake of clarity, we should recognise what is happening here. If you take the idea of infinite duration away from the doctrine of eternal torment, all you are left with is a finite punishment – which is exactly what the doctrine of conditional

immortality teaches. You can solve the problems caused by eternal torment by turning the doctrine into something functionally equivalent to conditional immortality – but, if you want to do this, why not be honest and recognise what you are doing?

3.j. Justice and punishment

If we are looking for a system which delivers fair and just punishment, then we need to be clear what the criteria for such a system might be.

Punishment is a necessary part of any human legal system. And it seems clear from the Bible that the same is true when we consider God's justice.

It is worth asking the question: what is the point of Hell? Human punishment is morally justified on the grounds that it aims to achieve certain good goals: justice, deterrence, reformation and retribution. Let's look at each of them briefly.

- **Reformation:** neither eternal torment nor conditional immortality makes any claim to reform the lost soul: both beliefs consider that reformation can only happen before death. But I claim that conditional immortality offers an attractive and Biblical description of God, which draws people to Him and encourages repentance and reformation; eternal torment presents people with a harsh and cruel God which naturally repulses people, thus discouraging reformation.
- **Retribution:** the one who has been harmed may desire and seek retribution, but the legal system must ensure that the punishment imposed is both proportionate and appropriate; conditional immortality can deliver this, but eternal torment cannot.
- **Deterrence:** the prospect of every sin being punished in a proportionate and appropriate way can act as a deterrent if people believe in conditional immortality; if they believe in eternal torment, as already explained, they already face the harshest possible punishment, so the threat provides no reason to avoid further sin.
- **Justice:** when something wrong is done, justice (some say, 'the universe') requires a moral balancing. Conditional immortality can offer the prospect of proportional and appropriate punishment for each sin; eternal torment can only offer punishment which is neither proportionate nor appropriate, so it can never provide a moral balance.

3.k. The fairness of destruction

We finish this section with a simple observation: if God must punish sin, if different people sin different amounts, if some sin is more serious than other sin and if the punishment must be appropriate to the offence, then different people must receive different punishments.

This is, after all, what Jesus taught us will happen.

The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving of punishment will be beaten with few blows. (Luke 12:47-48)

Eternal torment produces the same infinite punishment for everyone, but destruction allows for the possibility that each lost soul will suffer an appropriate amount before their existence is ended. If different levels of suffering are required, the doctrine of conditional immortality can deliver this.

Personally, I am not convinced that God does make people suffer after death, not in any deliberate way. But that is a different conversation, for another time. Nobody argues for an unfair system, and a fair system must be capable of delivering fair punishment; from whatever direction we consider the question, it is clear that conditional immortality can produce fair punishment, but eternal torment cannot.

4. Some Further Details

4.a. *The nature of spiritual fire*

When I talk with people about eternal torment, we often go down an odd cul-de-sac concerning the nature of the fire the Bible talks about.

I explain that the function of fire in these Biblical passages is to destroy, not to torment for eternity. In response, people often explain that human souls are not material objects, so they cannot be consumed by fire.³⁶

The conversation often gets a bit tricky at this point, so we need to take it step by step. Let's start with the things which seem obvious to both sides of the conversation.

The first obvious thing: fire – literal fire, the thing that burns weeds and trees – is a rapid oxidation of combustible material. The extraction of energy from food is a slower version of oxidation, and rusting is a much slower version. Fire can only burn physical material: it is a chemical process which can only affect physical material. Physical processes act on physical objects.

The second obvious thing: literal, physical fire cannot consume a human soul, because a soul is not a physical object. Fire hurts because it consumes – because it causes damage to the physical body. So fire – literal, physical fire – cannot either hurt or harm a human soul.

The third obvious thing: when the Bible talks about fire in connection with judgement after death, it is not talking about physical fire: it must be talking about something in the spiritual realm which acts in a way which is similar to fire in the physical realm.

The question then arises: does the spiritual equivalent of fire operate in the spiritual realm in essentially the same way that physical fire operates in the physical realm?

I think that fire is used by many Biblical writers as a picture of something which happens in the spiritual realm because it is a good picture. Jesus' explanation of the parable of the weeds is as good an example as any. Talking about 'all who do evil', He says:

They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:42)

When we are told that all who do evil will be thrown into the blazing furnace, this must surely be because the spiritual reality described as the furnace acts on the souls of those who do evil in the same way that the physical furnace acts on the weeds in the parable.

36 If this aspect interests you, Aquinas addresses the question in more detail in his *Summa Theologica*, Question 97, Articles 5-7.

I recognise that a parable is a story with a purpose; it is not an allegory in which every detail has significance: there is one core point, and everything else in that parable is just contributing to make that point clearly and effectively.

But there is no point in talking about a furnace in this context if the furnace does not do what you would expect a furnace to do! You use familiar objects in a parable precisely because they are familiar and everybody knows what they do.

There is a consistency about the way the Bible uses the image of fire. The way that fire is used in this and other parables is significant, and there is a high level of agreement amongst Biblical interpreters on this point.

But even if we are wrong here and the use of the image of fire in this parable is not significant, that does not help those who believe in eternal torment. Why? Because, in order to make this passage fit into their reading of the Bible, they have to insist on two things: firstly, that the reference to fire is significant; and secondly, that it is used as a bad picture of what happens in the spiritual realm.

If destruction is the fate of the wicked, then the image of fire is being used consistently in the Bible: fire destroys, and the wicked who are thrown into the fire are destroyed. But if eternal destruction is the fate of the wicked, then the image of fire is used inconsistently: fire destroys, but the wicked who are thrown into the fire are not destroyed.

We know, often from personal experience, that personal contact with fire will cause pain (although, as we have seen, the Bible consistently avoids making this point), so the destruction of a conscious living person by means of fire² will inevitably be painful; but the people who believe in eternal torment ask us to believe that the wicked somehow suffer this pain without the destruction which causes it.

You cannot have it both ways: fire, as a physical process, cannot consume a human soul, but neither can it cause the soul pain. A spiritual equivalent of fire can cause pain to the soul, but then a spiritual equivalent of fire can also destroy a soul. For eternal torment to be possible, we have to believe that what happens in the spiritual realm corresponds to an occasional by-product of fire (pain), but not to the essential activity of fire (destruction) – without any evidence at all, not a single text suggesting that such an interpretation was intended.

I am aware that, in this discussion, I have been making a distinction between the spiritual and material realms. The distinction is, I believe, a valid one: they are distinct, but this does not mean they are disconnected.

Much of the Bible's teaching is about the connection between the spiritual and the material, and this connection is assumed throughout the Bible. We can take just one very simple and obvious example.

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain (Psalm 127:1)

So who builds the house? Is it the Lord, or the human builder? Somehow, it is both.

On a deeper level, we know that physical suffering can lead to bitterness and alienation from God (and, of course, to many other spiritual outcomes); guilt can produce all kinds of physical sickness and suffering.

So the spiritual and physical realms do interact in all kinds of interesting and complicated ways. How they interact is one of those fascinating questions we are not going to explore right now. But whatever the outcome of that exploration, it will not change the basic reality that physical fire causes physical destruction and sometimes pain, but on its own does not hurt the human soul.

4.b. ‘Destruction’ means destruction!

We need to be clear about this: when the Biblical writers talk about destruction, these are not vague or polite references to something completely different. That sort of thing *does* happen in the Bible – for example, several references to ‘feet’ in the Old Testament are polite ways of talking about sexual organs. But there is not a shred of evidence that the word ‘destruction’ is used in this way. When Jesus says that Judas was “doomed to destruction” (John 17:12), that is *exactly* what He intended to communicate.

But does fire always consume and destroy?

Clearly, the physical fire we are familiar with consumes the fuel it burns. Impure metal can be purified by fire either because the fire burns up the dross and leaves the purified metal behind, or because in its molten state the pure metal separates from the dross; but the fuel is always consumed. That is the way physical fire works.

But God’s fire does not always work that way. On two or three occasions in the Bible, God’s fire does not consume.

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were all together in one place.

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each one of them. (Acts 2:3)

This is clearly not real fire: it only “seemed to be tongues of fire” and it did not behave like fire, partly because of the way it moved and partly because nothing was burning and nothing was consumed. The same thing may have happened while Peter was preaching to Cornelius (Acts 10:44), although fire is not explicitly mentioned on this occasion.

And back in the Old Testament, while Moses was tending the flock, he came to Horeb.

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. (Exodus 3:2)

And you know what happens next.

It seems that on these two occasions, the fire from God, or something which appears to be fire from God, does not consume; but it probably does not produce heat either. I know the Bible is not explicit here, but I suspect that if the tongues of fire had scorched the hair on the heads of the disciples, they might have mentioned this. And I am guessing that if this thing like fire hurt them without consuming their hair, this might also have been mentioned.

I am guessing here – but that is the point. The Bible does not explicitly tell us that

the fire did not hurt the disciples, but it equally clearly does not tell us that the fire did hurt them without consuming their hair.

If you want to tell me that God is capable of producing fire which hurts but does not consume, I will gladly agree with you. But there is not a shred of evidence to tell us that this is what He actually did in Exodus or in Acts. Or anywhere else in the Bible.

works for the council I accept that God is capable of producing something like fire which hurts souls without consuming them. But that is not the question. We are not asking what God is *capable* of doing: we are asking what the Bible tells us He *actually* does.

The Bible does not tell us that the fire in Exodus or in Acts could hurt without consuming, without destroying. The Bible does not tell us about *any* fire which does that. You can believe in it if you like, but does the Bible teach it? No.

One final point here: the fire in these two passages does not behave like ordinary fire, and the Bible tells us that this is the case. It is, I suggest, a reasonable expectation that if we were supposed to understand that the fire to which souls are consigned does not behave like ordinary fire, this would also be made clear.

In brief: fire destroys. This is our experience in real life, and it is what the Bible tells us; on the few occasions when something like fire does not destroy, the Bible tells us very clearly. Everywhere else, we can confidently expect fire to behave like fire, and consume what it is burning.

4.c. *Heaven and Earth*

Most people are familiar with the old ‘three tier’ idea of the world: we live on the Earth; God lives in Heaven, above the clouds; and Satan lives in Hell, in the ground beneath our feet. Unfortunately, this picture belongs to the Middle Ages more than it does to Biblical times.

In section 1.f, ‘Greek and Hebrew souls’, we established that it is very important to distinguish clearly between the Hebrew and Greek world views, but on this point they are essentially in agreement: they both see all of reality divided into two vital aspects, Heaven and Earth.

The Biblical writers, in common with much of the ancient world, recognised a basic distinction (but also a basic connection) between earthly things and heavenly things: The deep underlying (but often hidden) connection between earthly things and heavenly things is the basis for much of what can be called either ‘magic’ or ‘early science’. And, together, the earthly things and heavenly things make up all of creation.

Heaven is both the place where God lives (2 Chronicles 20:6) and the sky. We have one word with two distinct but related meanings: sometimes there is a conceptual overlap, but in general there is no confusion in the Bible between these two meanings. When the Biblical writers are talking about ‘heavenly things’, they don’t mean birds.

In the Bible, Heaven is the alternative to Earth. Earth is reality we know; Heaven is

the other reality, the reality we don't yet know; they are both vitally important.³⁷ In contrast, Hell hardly features at all: it barely exists.

It is probably worth pointing out that, in the Bible, Hell is never presented as the counterpoint to Heaven, just as Satan is never presented as the dark counterpoint to God. In the Bible, Satan is never presented as the Lord of the Underworld – this is an entirely Greek picture. The idea of God and Satan squaring off against each other is familiar from films and other elements of popular culture and draws more from Zoroastrianism and the Yin and Yang of Chinese philosophy than it does from the Bible. There is one passing reference to “war in Heaven” (Revelation 12:7), but it would be rash to build a doctrine on the basis of a single verse, especially a single verse in Revelation.

Heaven and Earth are the two realms, the two fundamental realities in the Bible, which is why the author of Genesis *says* that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1), when he *means* that God created everything.

You see the same idea being expressed by Paul in Colossians.

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. (Colossians 1:16)

He created things in Heaven (the invisible) and things on Earth (the visible); together they make up ‘all things’. The thrones, powers, rulers and authorities are all part of the invisible, Heavenly things created by God and under His rule.

If you have a three-tier understanding of the universe (Earth plus Heaven above plus Hell below), then you will completely mis-read passages such as this one in Ephesians.

He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

If you read this through the lens of a three-tier universe, you will hear Paul saying that it is God's purpose to sum up in Christ the important things – all things in Heaven and all things on Earth, but not all things in Hell: obviously, those things have nothing to do with Christ.

But this is not what Paul is saying at all. It is God's purpose to sum up *all things* in Christ; Paul then clarifies what he means by this: ‘all things’ really means all things: not just all heavenly things, but all earthly things too.

Other passages also make it quite clear that all things will be subjected to Christ.

When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:28, NASB)

As I say, this basic understanding is shared, not only by the Biblical writers in the Hebrew tradition, but also from the Greek writers. It can be seen in the Greek myths,

³⁷ So, in Biblical terms, Heaven is ‘the other place’ – not Hell. Sorry about that. People like the title, even if it is slightly misleading.

where all the gods we are familiar with are descended from the union of *ouranos* ('heaven' or 'sky' – we know him better as Uranus) and *gaia* ('Mother Earth'). And in Ancient Egypt you had the same pairing with the sexes reversed: they taught about *geb* (the male main deity of the earth), whose consort was *nut* (the female sky).

In summary, the world view of the Biblical writers is entirely consistent on this subject. In the Bible, as with other ancient literature, there are two fundamental aspects of reality: Heaven and Earth, the spiritual and the physical.

It is this context which helps us understand the story in Genesis about the creation of the human race.

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

The Hebrew makes the connections clearer than the English does: *adam* is both the word for 'man' (as in human) and the name of the first man; while *adamah* is the word for 'ground' – from which the *adam* is taken, and to which he will return (Genesis 3:19).

The human race, uniquely in all creation, is identified as being a combination of the physical (the dust of the ground) and the spiritual (the breath of God, the breath of life). This combination defines us. This is why our destiny is not to be disembodied spirits floating around with ethereal harps, but spirits in resurrected bodies inhabiting a new Earth.

It is worth observing that the account in Genesis describes the creation of man in more detail than the creation of other creatures. In other Old Testament passages (such as Ecclesiastes 3:21) it is clear that man and animals both have a spirit, although it is unclear how similar the spirit of a man and the spirit of an animal are.

In Hebrew, *ruach* can be 'wind' or 'breath' or 'spirit' (either God's or man's); the Greek *pneuma* has the same range of meaning. There is a clear connection between the heavens (the sky and the place where God lives) and the spiritual.

This is not the place for a detailed study, but I simply note that these two concepts (Heaven/sky and Spirit/wind) both embrace each of the two fundamental aspects of reality – the spiritual and the physical. There is no third aspect corresponding to Hell as the third realm (as publicised in the Middle Ages) because Hell simply does not exist in the same way that Heaven and Earth do. At least, not in a Biblical cosmology.

Those who insist that Hell exists in the Biblical cosmology usually point to three passages to justify this:

- 1 Peter 3:18-20,
- Philippians 2:9-11 and
- Ephesians 4:8-10.

Peter talks about the spirits in prison without indicating where that prison was. In Philippians, Paul is insisting that Jesus is Lord of everything: not even the dead are excluded from the reach of His authority.

In Ephesians, the Greek is ambiguous: it could mean either 'the regions of the

earth, which lie below' or 'the lowest regions of the earth'. In one case, Paul has the Cross in mind, when Jesus died and descended to the grave; in the other, Paul has the incarnation in mind, when Jesus descended to Earth from Heaven.³⁸ In context, it seems to me to make much more sense for Paul to be talking here about the incarnation as being the essential prerequisite for the ascension. But in neither case is he talking about Hell as a separate region. So none of these passages refer to a Hell which exists as something outside the Biblical universe of Heaven and Earth.

4.d. *Eternity*

As I have said several times: when the Biblical writers use terms like 'for ever', 'eternal' or 'everlasting', they generally refer to purpose and not duration. Sometimes we are expected to understand that the duration will be literally without end, but the precise meaning depends on the context.

There are various time-related concepts in the Bible. We don't have space here to go into the details of each of the words used and how they relate to each other. If you want to look them up, the main New Testament words are *aion* (aeon, age, epoch, life-span, eternity), 'kairos' (time, moment), *chronos* (time, period of time) and *hora* (hour, point of time). The one we are most interested in is *aion*, and you can see from the range of words used to translate it that (as we have repeatedly noted) it does not always refer to unending duration.

We find the same situation when considering the meaning of the word *olam* in the Old Testament. Many details of Biblical Hebrew are less clear than we would like, but on this point the writers of the Old and New Testaments are in agreement. There are places where *olam* means 'endless duration', and places where it clearly does not.

We have already noted that, in both the Old and New Testaments, the words we translate as 'eternal' are usually better understood as 'never failing' than 'never ending'; when they refer to a period, they they generally mean something like a cycle or age – very close to our word 'world' when we talk about the Greek world, the Roman world or the modern world.

It is sometimes suggested that eternal punishment must include the idea of unending duration because it is paralleled (for example, in Matthew 25:46) with eternal life, which does have unending duration. We have already noted that the punishment *does* have unending duration because the individual being punished will cease to exist for all eternity. But it is also worth noting that many scholars do not think these passages refer to unending duration for either the life or the punishment: the text simply refers to the life of the age – the world – to come, and the punishment of the world to come. Our belief that the life of the world to come will be unending in duration rests on other grounds.

4.e. *Immortality*

There is one other detail to note about the theological language being used: the 'immortal' bit of 'conditional immortality' means 'not subject to death'. God alone is

38 See Brown, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, volume 2, pages 209-210 for more detail on this point.

immortal by nature, but He can grant us immortality. In that sense, He makes us like him: we are, like Him, without end. Of course, He remains unique in not having a beginning.

There is one slightly confusing consequence of using the term ‘conditional immortality’ and it comes about when we start to talk about the state of Adam and Eve before the fall – again, it makes no difference whether or not you understand the story to be history or mythology. In a sense, they were immortal: in their sinless state, they were neither dying nor destined to die; but they were immortal neither in the way that God is by nature nor in the way that we inherit.

So it is possible to describe their original state as one of ‘conditional immortality’ – but it is almost the opposite of the conditional immortality we are talking about here. Lost, sinful people can gain immortality when they choose to believe in Jesus; Adam and Eve could (and did!) lose immortality when they chose to disobey God.

There are, of course, other interpretations of the passage, but none of the debate around the early chapters of Genesis affects the central premise of this work. I think it is less confusing to refer to their initial state as one of ‘potential immortality’: they had the possibility of living forever, which is presumably what the tree of life was about (Genesis 2:9).

4.f. *Hell in the Old Testament*

In the Old Testament, the grave (*sheol*) is the place of the dead. The derivation is unclear; most probably it comes from the Hebrew root meaning ‘to be sunk in’ or ‘to be hollow’, in which case it denotes a cave or a place under the earth. It is sometimes translated as ‘Hell’ or ‘death’. It is a dark, shadowy place, where nothing much happens and nothing much can happen – certainly not torment. And torment would not be appropriate in any case: both the righteous and the unrighteous go there.

David seems to have had no difficulty with the idea he might go there.

If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. (Psalm 139:8, NASB)

If you think of *sheol* as being the grave, in quite a modern sense, you won’t go far wrong. Even today, people talk about the dead “sleeping in the ground” when there is actually no suggestion that they are doing anything other than slowly decaying. (“Sleeping with the fishes” is a familiar maritime equivalent.) *Sheol* is under the ground simply because that is where the dead bodies were put. So *sheol* is about as unlike the ‘traditional’ (that is, Medieval) Hell as it is possible to get.

Satan, who is not a dead person, has nothing to do with the place: he can be found, with the other spiritual beings, in Heaven. At least, when the angels “present themselves before the Lord” (Job 1:6), Satan comes with them. He has come “from roaming throughout the earth” (Job 1:7) because, if you arrive in Heaven, that is the only place you can have come from. Satan is not telling God that he has come from Earth rather than from Hell, he is refusing to tell God where he has been. It is like the classic teenager’s response to “Where have you been?” “Out.”

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use in

Jesus' day) *hades* occurs over 100 times, most of them translating the Hebrew *sheol*. In Homer, '*Hades*' is the name of the god of the underworld; in much of the rest of Greek literature, it is the place where the dead, good and bad alike, go.

4.g. *Hell in the New Testament*

There are three main words for 'Hell' used in the New Testament: *hades* (the underworld, the place of the dead); *abyssos* (the pit, the abyss); and *gehenna* (the rubbish dump). In one place (Ephesians 4:9) we get *katoteros* (lower), which might be a reference to the underworld, but is probably just a reference to this world as lower than Heaven. And in one place (2 Peter 2:4), there is a reference to *tartarus*, a far region of *hades* reserved initially for gods but later used for people who had committed particularly loathsome actions.

As a basic summary, demons inhabit *abyssos*; while humans go to *hades* to wait and, maybe afterwards, to *gehenna*. You can think of *hades* as being the waiting room where we will all go before the final judgment (unless, of course, we are still alive at the final trumpet): as in a railway station, it does not matter what your final destination may be, until the train arrives, everybody shares the same waiting room. And *gehenna* is the final destination, after the final judgement, for those who reject God and the invitation to Heaven.

The usual word used by Greek speakers in new Testament days for the place where the dead go was *hades*, which originally corresponded very closely to the Old Testament idea of *sheol*. In the period between the Old and New Testaments, the idea of the immortality of the soul was introduced and, for those who believed it, this changed the concept of *hades*, turning it from the resting place of all, into a place where the ungodly remain while the godly enter some form of heavenly blessedness.

This was an ongoing theological battle in the time of Jesus. According to Josephus, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the body and eternal torment of the wicked, while it seems clear that the Sadducees remained faithful to the Old Testament and believed in neither. It is entirely possible that Josephus exaggerated, and only a minority of Pharisees believed in eternal torment, but clearly some of them did.

Jesus was not afraid to voice an opinion on difficult subjects, so it is very odd that He had nothing to say about this important debate. Or it would be odd, if He agreed with one side, which would have been the case if he believed in eternal torment. But if he believed both sides were wrong – the Sadducees for denying the resurrection, the Pharisees for believing in eternal torment – then His reluctance to side with one group or the other in this debate makes perfect sense.

In passing, it is worth noting that Christians often feel they 'know' the Pharisees, through the references to them in the New Testament and through sermons, but they don't easily fit the simple stories we sometimes tell – so, in Luke's writings, the Pharisees are not generally opposed to Jesus.

Josephus tells us the Pharisees had the support and goodwill of the common people, but it is thought he was one himself so he may be biased in his opinion. Pharisees accepted the Mishna (the written text of the 'Oral Torah') alongside the

Torah and accepted a number of Greek ideas about the spirit world and the after-life (for example, they believed in angels and expected a judgement in the next life), but they criticised the Sadducees for accepting other Greek ideas.

So while some Jews in Jesus' day did believe in eternal torment, this belief was not part of mainstream Judaism, and it clearly came from Greek thought and not the Hebrew Old Testament.

In the New Testament and other literature of the time, there is a clear distinction between the place for people and the place for demons: *hades* is the place where all dead people go, while *abyssos* is primarily the place of demons. When Jesus encounters the Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26-39) the demons beg not to be sent into the *abysson* – meaning, presumably, *back* into the *abysson*.

The other main word for 'Hell' in the New Testament is Gehenna, a simple transliteration of the Greek word *gehenna*, which is the name of a place: the Valley of Hinnom (*ge'hinnom* in Hebrew), immediately to the South-West of Jerusalem. Why this is the case, and what it means, gets a bit complicated.

The clear picture of Gehenna is of a rubbish tip, the place where the city's rubbish was taken to be dumped and burned or left to rot. The fire there never went out and the worm never died because people were always bringing new rubbish. This had become well established by the time of the New Testament, but it is important to remember that this picture relates to the Gehenna where people go when they die, not the physical valley.

People sometimes object to the idea that Gehenna is understood as a rubbish tip, on the grounds that there is no evidence that the physical place was actually used as a rubbish tip in Jesus' day. But the fact is that it *was* understood in that way: it is possible for a place to have a symbolic meaning even if the symbolism is not literally true. When we sing about 'crossing the Jordan' when we die, we are not anticipating that we will be thrown into the middle of a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians: to confuse the symbolism of the place and the physical reality is a simple category error.

We first meet the place in Joshua 15:8, where the Valley of Ben Hinnom (the valley of the sons of Hinnom) forms part of the boundary of the land given to the tribe of Judah. By the time of the divided Kingdom, it had become a place known for child sacrifice.

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and also made idols for worshipping the Baals. He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his children in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. (2 Chronicles 28:1-3)

Perhaps because of this history, Gehenna features in the passage about God's judgement in Isaiah 30, which includes familiar references to fire and sulphur.

See, the Name of the Lord comes from afar,
with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke;
his lips are full of wrath,

and his tongue is a consuming fire. (Isaiah 30:27)

The climax of this account is located at Topheth, a place in the valley of Ben Hinnom.

Topheth has long been prepared;
it has been made ready for the king.
Its fire pit has been made deep and wide,
with an abundance of fire and wood;
the breath of the Lord,
like a stream of burning sulphur,
sets it ablaze. (Isaiah 30:33)

The valley was still known for child sacrifice when King Josiah started his reforms.

He desecrated Topheth, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice their son or daughter in the fire to Molek. (2 Kings 23:10)

Despite this, the problem remained in the time of Jeremiah.

The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire – something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away. (Jeremiah 7:30-33)

Gehenna also features in Jeremiah's prophecy against Jerusalem (Jeremiah 19:1-15), which includes the threat that "the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Judah, shall be defiled as the place of Tophet" (Jeremiah 19:13).

All these events and prophecies feed into an association of the physical Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, with defilement, judgement and punishment, so it is not surprising that the Mishna (created in the period between the Old and New Testaments) frequently uses the place name to refer to the place of judgement and punishment in the afterlife,³⁹ and this is probably why the place of punishment in the New Testament is named Gehenna.

One final detail: in the inter-testamental literature, the duration of punishment in gehenna is limited to twelve months (and you are not punished on the Sabbath!), so while Gehenna is a place of punishment after death, it is not a place of eternal torment.

4.h. Destruction in the New Testament

Just as 'eternal' is not always about time without end, so 'destruction' is not always

39 For more details and some useful references, the Wikipedia article is a good starting point (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gehenna>) and also contains a helpful discussion of the ways different English translations have handled the various words relating to Hell.

about totally ceasing to exist. We have already made the point that words have to be understood in context, and the Biblical writers were as sophisticated in their use of language as we are today. They frequently used words in a non-literal way.

So ‘destruction’ in the Bible has as wide a range of meaning as it does today – like when a football supporter says after a match, “We totally destroyed them!” and means that we scored a couple of goals more than the other team.

In Mark 4, the disciples are in a boat with Jesus and a storm is raging. In terror, they cry out, “Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38, NASB) In this context, the disciples clearly mean (as the NIV recognises, along with many other translations) they are afraid of drowning.

The word used in this passage is *apoleia*, which is the main term for destruction used in the New Testament, occurring over 100 times. You can use a concordance and work through all these passages – it takes time, but it is not difficult. There are many forms of destruction in the pages of the New Testament, but they are all variants of the same theme: the subject dies or ceases to exist. They are not secret, hidden references to suffering.

Finally, we should mention a related word. The “worm” (*skolex* in the Greek) “which dies not” (Mark 9:48 and various other passages) is clearly a maggot. The maggot eats dead flesh: by the time they arrive, the suffering is over.

So references to “the worm which dies not”, far from being a reference to suffering, is in reality evidence that no suffering can be taking place.

Actually, that is not strictly true: maggots are used sometimes in medical practice (even today) to clean wounds. They will eat the dead flesh and prevent infection, while leaving the living flesh alone. So maggots and suffering can go together. But, when they do, the role of the maggots is to reduce and prevent suffering, not to create it. So the humble maggot points us to the character of God; which I find, in a small way, satisfying.

5. Further Reading

Here are some of the many books which deal with this subject, or are referred to in the text. Some of them are reference works I have consulted; of the rest, some I have read and studied in detail, some I have skimmed through or (as with Anselm) merely dipped into. For most of the modern works, I have checked online feedback and reviews to ensure that they enjoy a reasonable level of popular reputation and credibility.

As far as I can tell, I have noted all the relevant material in these works, and adequately responded to all the points they make concerning the Bible's teaching about the nature of Hell, even if I have not explicitly referred to the author and the work in my footnotes: there is a great deal of overlap in the material they cover. More extensive references and bibliographies can be found in several of the works below; if I have failed to respond to any of their substantive points on this subject, please let me know and I will seek to remedy this in due course.

I have provided details of the reference for every intentional quote in this work, but inevitably, as I look again at these books, I see many places where I have expressed ideas in words and phrases which are very similar to the ones used by these other authors. This could be because I have learned from them and forgotten their source, or it could be because there are only so many ways of expressing these ideas. But if you spot anything which looks like a quote I should acknowledge, again, please let me know.

The following references are, as far as I can manage, to a reasonably recent edition of the published work; the date given is the date of publication of that edition. I occasionally provide the date the work was first published, when this information was readily available, but I have not gone out of my way to search for it.

Anselm of Canterbury, edited by Brian Davies and G R Evans. *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, Oxford World's Classics. OUP (2008)

This edition includes both the *Proslogion* and *Cur Deus Homo* ('Why God became Man') along with a dozen or so of his other writings. The *Proslogion* famously contains the first expression of the ontological argument for the existence of God, sparking off one of the most fascinating and irritating arguments in Western philosophy.

Aquinas, St Thomas. *The Summa Theologica*. Ave Maria Press (2000)

The 'premier work of Catholic theology'. I confess that I don't enjoy reading him: partly because of the content, and partly because of the style; but there is no doubt about his importance and the impact of his writings on mainstream Christian theology ever since.

Bell, Rob. *Love Wins*. Collins (2012)

It is hard to know what can be helpfully said about this Sunday Times bestseller,

“the world’s most talked-about modern Christian book”. He has been branded a heretic by parts of the Evangelical church on the strength of one paragraph and a few questions, but even if you disagree with some details (and I certainly did), it contains a wealth of wisdom, insight and prophetic challenge to the modern church. I encourage people to read it, gain what we can from the good bits and use the bits we disagree with to stimulate gracious discussion.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. The Banner of Truth Trust (1958) (first edition 1939)

I have a soft spot for Berkhof: this was my first book of systematic theology. I also enjoyed his *History of Christian Doctrines*, which helped me understand theology as an ongoing process.

Blackham, Paul. *The Great Unknown? What the Bible says about Heaven and Hell*. Christian Focus (2016)

A classic example of someone who is keen to tell you exactly what he believes and assure you that this is exactly what the Bible means, whatever it may actually say. Blackham is happy to throw out scholarship on the basis that he doesn’t like the conclusion. There are a few points which are deep and thoughtful, but I don’t feel it is worth wading through the long simplistic, repetitive and rambling text to find them. This quote, taken from his explanation of the story of Moses and the burning bush, gives a good idea of the style: “Though those saints had been dead for more than 400 years, the first thing the Eternal Christ wanted to tell Moses was that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were alive and well on the other side! It sounds almost too amazing to be true!”

Brown, Colin (editor). *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 volumes. Paternoster Press (1975-78)

I do not know of a more comprehensive reference work. As with any book of this type, how authoritative you consider it to be will depend to a large extent on how you feel about the individual contributors; but, wherever you stand, it is impossible to ignore.

Butler, Joshua Ryan. *The Skeletons in God’s Closet: the Mercy of Hell, the Surprise of Judgment, the Hope of Holy War*. Thomas Nelson (2014)

There is a lot to like about this book: it is very readable, it deals with some important topics, and the author’s heart is in the right place. In places, the argument depends too much on “I don’t like this, so it can’t be true” rather than solid scholarship, but most of the time he offers helpful comments and insights which I feel genuinely illuminate the Biblical text.

Chan, Francis and Preston Sprinkle. *Erasing Hell*. David C. Cook (2011)

While it is never stated, this book is clearly a response to Rob Bell’s *Love Wins*. This is a fascinating combination of clear and careful textual analysis and some very healthy exposition and application, with a few mistakes and misguided assumptions. His heart is in the right place, much of his scholarship is excellent and he is one of the few people who can make the doctrine of eternal torment sound halfway reasonable. While I disagree with some of his conclusions, he seems to have genuinely attempted to engage with the issues, and recognises that support for the traditional doctrine of Hell is neither simple nor clear. “The debate

about hell's duration is much more complex than I first assumed. While I lean heavily on the side that says it is everlasting, I am not ready to claim that with complete certainty." (Chapter 3)

Crockett, William (editor), with contributions by John F Walvoord, William V Crockett, Zachary J Hayes and Clark H Pinnock. *Four Views on Hell*. Zondervan (1996)

It does what it says on the tin: you get four views. Many people like this book, but I find it muddled with inadequate testing of the various opinions. The four views are presented as 'fundamentalist' (literal, eternal fire), 'metaphorical', 'purgatory' and 'annihilation'. It seems to me the quality of the contributions is very mixed, and several of the contributors don't seem to have read the articles they are responding to.

Dabney, Robert L. *Systematic Theology*. The Banner of Truth Trust (1985) (first published 1871)

Lecture LXXII is about 'Nature and Duration of Hell-Torments'. This is essentially the transcript of a series of lectures, and is very dated now. But, if you want to get a feel for what people were actually teaching on the subject not that long ago, it is an excellent resource.

Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy*. Everyman (1995)

This is available in many editions. His poem describes both Hell and Purgatory, as you would expect of a good Catholic of his day. I have not felt it necessary to explicitly address the subject of Purgatory, mainly because the Bible makes no reference to it.

Edwards, Jonathan. *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (2018)

The classic sermon, and Edwards' most famous work. It contains ten 'considerations', one of which says, "At any moment God shall permit him, Satan stands ready to fall upon the Wicked and seize them as his own". On a personal note, I find the comments posted on Amazon more frightening than the actual text: "Wonderful reminder of who God is." "a timely reminder to the church today," and so on.

Edwards, Jonathan. *The salvation of all men strictly examined; the endless punishment of those who die impenitent*. Kessinger Publishing (2010)

A classic, but mainly available as facsimile reproductions of earlier printings, which does not make for an easy read. If you don't want to read the whole thing, I suggest you turn to the 'Miscellaneous Remarks', section 23.

Fee, Gordon D and Douglas Stuart. *How to read the Bible for all its worth*. Zondervan, 4th edition (2014)

A good starting point for someone interested in understanding the Biblical text. Many people have found it a helpful introduction to areas such as the historic context and the various types of literature found in the Bible: narrative, poetry, letters, law and so on.

Fudge, Edward W, forward by Richard Bauckham. *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, third edition.

Wipf and Stock Publishers (2013)

A masterful work. “It concludes that hell is a place of total annihilation, everlasting destruction, although the destructive process encompasses conscious torment of whatever sort, intensity, and duration God might require in each individual case.”

Fudge considers not only the Biblical material but also the works of Christian teachers through the centuries.

Fudge, Edward W. *Hell: A Final Word*. Leafwood Publishers (2013)

A much shorter and more accessible version of *The Fire That Consumes*.

Fudge, Edward W and Robert A Peterson. *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue*. IVP Academic (2000)

The ‘two views’ are the traditional one of eternal torment and conditional immortality. You get lots of arguments and lots of refutations on both sides; it had the potential to be a very helpful analysis of the subject, but many people – myself included – find the style irritating.

Gregg, Steve. *All You Want To Know About Hell: three Christian views of God’s final solution to the problem of sin*. Thomas Nelson (2013)

Gregg aims to give an unbiased account of the three main views about the nature of Hell, although it seems probable that he favours the Universalist approach. There is a useful set of tables at the end listing the main arguments and the responses to each argument.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: an introduction to Biblical doctrine*. IVP (1994)

A standard modern systematic theology. He generally strikes a good balance between expressing his own opinions and giving a fair account of other views. It is intended for personal use and as an aid to private devotions, as well as for general theological reference.

Hilborn, David. *The Nature of Hell*. ACUTE (2000)

This was published by ACUTE – the (Evangelical) Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals, documenting the results of a two-year study they undertook on Hell. I found it underwhelming, and suspect their focus was more on the unity than on the truth – on the need to avoid offending or alienating Evangelical Alliance members, rather than fully exploring the subject, but it does consider the pastoral issues as well as the theological ones.

Jacoby, Douglas A. *What’s the Truth About Heaven and Hell? Sorting out confusion about the afterlife*. Harvest House Publishers (2013)

Jacoby has a broad scope, delving into many areas I keep well clear of, including near-death and out of body experiences, angels and ghosts. I like his style. For example, “Why would we think we could read just the last quarter of the Bible (the New Testament) without bothering to see how it connects to the first three quarters — and with nothing to guide us beyond common sense and local church tradition. Doesn’t sound like much of a method, does it?” In the reviews, people find it generally readable and helpful.

Jones, Tony. *Did god Kill Jesus? Searching for Love in History’s Most Famous Execution*. HarperOne (2015)

A brilliant, important, accurate, thorough and wonderfully readable account of the various ways in which Christians have understood the Atonement over the centuries. If you only read one book about the Atonement, make it this one! If you think the doctrine of substitutionary atonement fully describes what happened on the cross, read this soon.

Klassen, Randy. *What Does the Bible Really Say About Hell? Wrestling with the Traditional View*. Cascadia Publishing House (2001)

Klassen argues for the Universalist position, mostly (as far as I can tell) because he does not like the traditional one.

Koukl, Gregory. *Tactics: a game plan for discussing your Christian convictions*. Zondervan (2009)

A helpful, intelligent and readable book which aims to help Christians understand how to discuss their beliefs in a gentle, constructive and gracious way, and how to respond to many of the invalid arguments which are often used against our faith. It also promotes a fairly narrow and dogmatic version of the Christian faith, but I found it straightforward to distinguish between the good advice and the sometimes simplistic doctrinal positions.

McGrath, Alister (editor). *Christian Belief: The New Lion Handbook*. Lion Hudson (2006)

A popular modern guide to Christian belief. It talks about Heaven but not Hell, which is not even mentioned in the index – which is probably an accurate reflection of modern Christian belief.

Milne, Bruce. *Know the Truth*. IVP (1982, revised 1998)

I have happily used this as the core text for several courses on systematic theology: please do not think that my criticism of one small part of the text implies a criticism of the whole work.

Polkinghorne, John. *The Way the World Is: Christian Perspective of a Scientist*. Triangle (1983)

A personal account, worth reading if you are interested in the relationship between science and the Christian faith. Many people will disagree with aspects of his position, but that should not get in the way of gaining from his knowledge and experience in this field.

Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the two halves of life*. SPCK (2012)

An attractive, contemporary and accessible account of some familiar themes from classic spirituality, slightly marred by his insistence that the ‘two journeys’ he describes must be undertaken sequentially. All the people I know who have read it, found it to be illuminating and helpful.

Rowell, Geoffrey. *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life*. Oxford University Press (1974)

This is interesting as a study of Victorian ideas, but Rowell seems to think the Victorians invented the doctrine of conditional immortality and the work is not particularly helpful in this context.

Seymour, Charles. *A Theodicy of Hell*. Springer (2000)

Seymour goes into great detail about the philosophy and theology of Hell. If you are interested in that sort of thing, it is an excellent read. As you often find with works of this kind, he carefully defines terms and then uses them; if you disagree with the initial definition (and I think most people will disagree with many of them), what follows can be interesting from an academic perspective, but inevitably feels a bit irrelevant. I think he misses some points and misunderstands a few others, but overall it contains enough material to make a helpful contribution.

Travis, Stephen H. *Christ and the Judgement of God: Divine Retribution in the New Testament*. Marshall Pickering (1986)

Not easy reading, but a deeply impressive work offering a wealth of background and analysis of the key passages, with pithy and insightful expositions of a good number of NT passages. We are working within different frameworks, so I would like to adjust some of his assumptions and interpretations, but even so, much of the scholarship here is immensely valuable.

Vine, WE. *Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Oliphants (reprinted 1969)

The standard reference work, although it is now slightly dated. Colin Brown is more recent and a lot more detailed, but I would lay good odds that far more students and preachers still consult Vine on a regular basis.

Virkler, Henry A. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Baker Book House (1981)

It covers much of the usual ground in a reasonably readable way.

Walker, Daniel P. *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*. Routledge & Kegan Paul (1970)

A brilliant and informative book, but some parts are quite hard going. And it helps if you are multilingual.

Wenham, John. *Facing Hell: the story of a nobody*. Paternoster Press (1998)

A slightly odd book, but excellent reading. It is not only the story of Wenham's life but also an account of his interactions with the doctrine of conditional immortality and why he believed it. I love the honesty, the humanity and the depth of scholarship revealed in these pages. If you want to understand the modern day arguments and the people involved in them, there is no better place to start.

Williams, J Rodman. *Renewal Theology: the Church, the Kingdom, and Last Things*, vol 3. Zondervan (1992)

Chapter 12, 'The Purpose of Christ's Return', covers the subject of destruction very clearly.

6. Index of Bible References

All Scripture quotations used in the text are listed in Biblical order below. I apologise for the slightly odd presentation: numbering the books gets them into the correct order, and listing chapter or verse '2' as '02' ensures that it appears before '10'.

01 Genesis	
Genesis 01:01.....	153
Genesis 02:07.....	22, 154
Genesis 02:09.....	156
Genesis 02:16-17.....	23
Genesis 02:17.....	43
Genesis 03:19.....	154
Genesis 03:22-23.....	44
Genesis 03:22-24.....	24
Genesis 19:24.....	35
Genesis 19:26.....	35
Genesis 19:27-28.....	35, 78
02 Exodus	
Exodus 03:02.....	151
Exodus 15:07.....	46
04 Numbers	
Numbers 06:06.....	24
05 Deuteronomy	
Deuteronomy 32:40.....	27
06 Joshua	
Joshua 15:08.....	158
09 1 Samuel	
1 Samuel 01:22.....	28
1 Samuel 03:13.....	27
1 Samuel 26:03-25.....	24
10 2 Samuel	
2 Samuel 07:13.....	27
2 Samuel 12:15-23.....	97
11 1 Kings	
1 Kings 19:21.....	51
12 2 Kings	
2 Kings 05:27.....	28
2 Kings 23:10.....	159
14 2 Chronicles	
2 Chronicles 20:06.....	152
2 Chronicles 28:01-03.....	158
18 Job	
Job 01:06.....	156
Job 01:07.....	156
Job 16:09.....	37
Job 19:26.....	23

Job 26:06.....	48
19 Psalms	
Psalm 001:01,03a.....	45
Psalm 001:04.....	45
Psalm 002:12.....	48
Psalm 005:06.....	48
Psalm 034:08.....	127
Psalm 051:40.....	139
Psalm 073:12.....	46
Psalm 073:16-17.....	46
Psalm 073:19-20.....	46
Psalm 073:24.....	47
Psalm 073:27.....	46
Psalm 088:10-12.....	4
Psalm 103:09.....	77
Psalm 109:06-20.....	49
Psalm 115:05-08.....	47
Psalm 127:01.....	150
Psalm 139:07-08.....	17
Psalm 139:08, NASB.....	156
Psalm 148:06.....	28
20 Proverbs	
Proverbs 15:11.....	48
Proverbs 19:12.....	37
Proverbs 27:20.....	48
21 Ecclesiastes	
Ecclesiastes 03:21.....	154
Ecclesiastes 09:05-06.....	48
23 Isaiah	
Isaiah 09:05.....	48, 51
Isaiah 09:19.....	49, 51
Isaiah 29:05.....	45
Isaiah 30:27.....	159
Isaiah 30:33.....	159
Isaiah 38:18.....	4
Isaiah 47:14.....	77
Isaiah 66:23.....	70
Isaiah 66:24.....	67, 70
24 Jeremiah	
Jeremiah 07:30-33.....	159
Jeremiah 19:01-15.....	159
Jeremiah 19:13.....	159
Jeremiah 29:13.....	20
Jeremiah 30:11.....	18
25 Lamentations	
Lamentations 02:16.....	37
26 Ezekiel	
Ezekiel 18:23.....	106
Ezekiel 28:18-19.....	77
27 Daniel	
Daniel 03:06.....	74
Daniel 03:19.....	74
Daniel 03:22-23.....	74
Daniel 12:02.....	73
32 Jonah	
Jonah 02:06.....	27

33 Micah

Micah 06:08.....137

39 Malachi

Malachi 04:01.....46, 51, 56

40 Matthew

Matthew 03:10.....52

Matthew 03:11.....52

Matthew 03:12.....52

Matthew 05:13.....60

Matthew 05:29-30.....69, 94

Matthew 05:44-45.....127

Matthew 06:20.....90

Matthew 07:13-14.....59, 121

Matthew 07:16.....85, 95

Matthew 07:24-27.....59

Matthew 08:11.....37, 121

Matthew 08:11-12.....37

Matthew 08:12.....37p.

Matthew 10:28.....60, 87

Matthew 10:32-33.....20, 104

Matthew 11:28.....21

Matthew 13:24-30.....52

Matthew 13:36.....38

Matthew 13:36-43.....38

Matthew 13:40.....52, 54

Matthew 13:40-42.....52

Matthew 13:41.....54

Matthew 13:42.....37p., 55, 149

Matthew 13:47-50.....53

Matthew 13:50.....37

Matthew 15:08.....95

Matthew 18:01.....69

Matthew 18:08-09.....69

Matthew 18:09.....67, 69

Matthew 19:16.....25

Matthew 19:29.....25

Matthew 20:01-16.....129

Matthew 22:13.....37p.

Matthew 22:36-40.....85

Matthew 23:01-36.....21

Matthew 24:51.....37

Matthew 25:23.....98

Matthew 25:30.....37

Matthew 25:31.....68, 100, 125

Matthew 25:31-46.....125

Matthew 25:32-33.....68

Matthew 25:40.....135

Matthew 25:41.....67p., 77

Matthew 25:46.....25, 67p., 155

Matthew 27:40.....18

Matthew 28:19.....121

41 Mark

Mark 01:18.....119

Mark 03:04.....18

Mark 04:38, NASB.....160

Mark 08:34-38.....61

Mark 09:43-49.....70

Mark 09:44.....	67
Mark 09:48.....	160
Mark 10:17.....	25
Mark 10:30.....	25
42 Luke	
Luke 03:09.....	52
Luke 06:35-36.....	5
Luke 08:26-39.....	158
Luke 09:55.....	18
Luke 09:55-56, NASB.....	18
Luke 10:25.....	25
Luke 12:47-48.....	146
Luke 13:28.....	37
Luke 14:15-23.....	124
Luke 15:11-32.....	125
Luke 16:19-31.....	26, 71
Luke 18:18.....	25
Luke 18:30.....	25
Luke 19:27.....	62
Luke 23:34.....	101
43 John	
John 03:15.....	25
John 03:16.....	1, 18, 20, 25, 31pp., 44, 65, 75, 82, 88
John 03:19.....	124
John 03:36.....	25
John 04:14.....	25
John 07:37-38.....	27
John 15:01-08.....	54
John 15:06.....	54
John 15:16.....	54
John 17:03.....	32
John 17:12.....	151
John 18:18.....	36, 51
John 18:36.....	94
John 20:19-29.....	23
John 21:09.....	36
John 21:22.....	130
44 Acts	
Acts 02:03.....	151
Acts 05:01-11.....	145
Acts 07:54.....	37
Acts 10:44.....	151
Acts 13:46.....	25
Acts 23:12-13.....	28
45 Romans	
Romans 01:18-20.....	133
Romans 01:20.....	65
Romans 02:05-11.....	61
Romans 02:07.....	25
Romans 05:09-10.....	123
Romans 05:10.....	123
Romans 06:07.....	21
Romans 06:23.....	33
Romans 08:18, NASB.....	26
Romans 08:19, NASB.....	118
Romans 10:09-10.....	119
Romans 12:01.....	120

46 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 03:10-15.....	53
1 Corinthians 03:10-17.....	57
1 Corinthians 03:13.....	56p., 70
1 Corinthians 03:15.....	57
1 Corinthians 03:17.....	57
1 Corinthians 13:12.....	114
1 Corinthians 15:20.....	120
1 Corinthians 15:28, NASB.....	64, 153
1 Corinthians 15:35-58.....	23
1 Corinthians 15:41-42.....	90
1 Corinthians 15:54.....	33

47 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 05:14-15.....	123
2 Corinthians 05:19, NASB.....	124, 132

48 Galatians

Galatians 06:08.....	60
----------------------	----

49 Ephesians

Ephesians 01:09-10.....	63, 153
Ephesians 01:10.....	63
Ephesians 01:13.....	63
Ephesians 02:01-03.....	61
Ephesians 02:08-10.....	128
Ephesians 04:08-10.....	154
Ephesians 04:09.....	157

50 Philippians

Philippians 01:23-24.....	102
Philippians 02:09-11.....	63, 154

51 Colossians

Colossians 01:16.....	153
Colossians 01:17.....	65
Colossians 01:19-20.....	63

51 James

James 04:12.....	18
------------------	----

53 2 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians 01:07.....	56, 67p.
2 Thessalonians 01:07-09.....	67p.
2 Thessalonians 01:08-09.....	56
2 Thessalonians 02:08.....	57

54 1 Timothy

1 Timothy 02:03-06.....	124
1 Timothy 02:04.....	118, 130
1 Timothy 06:16.....	24

55 2 Timothy

2 Timothy 02:12.....	20
----------------------	----

58 Hebrews

Hebrews 01:03.....	65
Hebrews 06:04-06,09.....	127
Hebrews 09:27.....	103p.
Hebrews 10:39.....	62
Hebrews 11:01.....	119
Hebrews 11:06.....	132

59 James

James 04:12.....	18
------------------	----

60 1 Peter

1 Peter 01:07.....	51
1 Peter 03:18-20.....	154
61 2 Peter	
2 Peter 01:04.....	61
2 Peter 02:01.....	62p., 130
2 Peter 02:03.....	63
2 Peter 02:04.....	157
2 Peter 02:06.....	36
2 Peter 02:12.....	63
2 Peter 03:09.....	18, 130
2 Peter 03:15-16.....	73
62 1 John	
1 John 02:02.....	123
1 John 04:08.....	134
1 John 04:16.....	34, 101
1 John 05:13.....	25
65 Jude	
Jude 06-07.....	71
Jude 07.....	27, 52, 67
Jude 12.....	71
Jude 13.....	67, 71
Jude 21.....	25
66 Revelation	
Revelation 07:09.....	121
Revelation 14:06-09.....	81
Revelation 14:09-11.....	31, 67, 78, 82
Revelation 14:11.....	79
Revelation 18:01-08.....	78
Revelation 18:09.....	78
Revelation 18:17-18.....	78
Revelation 19:01.....	78
Revelation 19:03.....	79, 81
Revelation 20:10.....	67, 77, 82
Revelation 21:01.....	28, 64, 81
Revelation 21:04.....	64, 77
Revelation 21:06-08.....	65
Revelation 21:25.....	79
Revelation 22:05.....	28, 79
Revelation 22:14-15.....	64