

All Things New?

In several places, Scripture testifies to the idea that there is a reality in which everything is very good (Gen. 1:31); a reality in which all things are made new (Rev. 21:5); where “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them,” praises God and the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 5:13); a place where Jesus, the Light, fills all things (Eph. 4:9) and every knee bows and every tongue gives praise (Romans 14:11, Phil. 2:10-11, Isaiah 45:23). Well, if that’s the case—and Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35)—then where the hell is Hell? I mean, how do we reconcile Scripture with “popular” notions of “Hell” . . . an endless Hell?

That question comes as a surprise for many; for we’ve been told that the popular view of Hell—a place where God tortures people or allows people to be tortured forever without end—is a biblical idea. The more I’ve studied it, the more I’ve become convinced that this “doctrine” is a very unbiblical idea... perhaps it’s even a satanic idea.

Ever since I was a boy, I’ve been bothered by the idea, but I had a good father who always reminded me that God was better than we thought and that He was capable of great surprises. In Seminary, I somehow stumbled across *The Fire that Consumes*, by Edward Fudge. It was an absolute breath of fresh air that set me free to think and hope in new directions. Of course, Fudge argues that God does not endlessly torture the creatures that He has made; however in some, or many, cases He does annihilate them.

The idea sustained me for years. And yet the task of preparing exegetical messages over the last three decades exposed me to a set of scriptures and ideas that burst even my unorthodox annihilationist sympathies. I began to see that the reality in which all things are good is depicted as an eternal reality, and that many of the things in that reality—like Israel, Jerusalem, and even Sodom—had once been annihilated. Furthermore, my annihilationist leanings couldn’t explain pivotal texts like 1 Cor. 15:22, “*As in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive.*”

It seemed to me that Paul meant just what he said. Of course, there is an order to all of this (1 Cor. 15:23-25), and, of course, if someone was “made alive” they necessarily believed. (My Calvinism had always taught me that faith was a creation of grace). Well, I began to realize that annihilation did not eliminate the possibility of redemption. In fact, many texts (Zeph. 3:8-9, Ezekiel 16, basically all of Isaiah, etc.), and indeed whole theological systems, seemed to indicate that all would be annihilated and all would be

redeemed. I began to see that annihilation was no obstacle to re-creation, particularly when God is eternal, the new creation is eternal and annihilation is a temporal act.

Over the last twenty-five years, I've preached my way into a new paradigm—I've come to believe that Jesus always wins. Even when He loses, especially when He loses, He wins. And when I preach from this paradigm, Scripture makes sense to me, and sense *of* me.

I believe that our culture is ripe for some new sense—some new *logos*, eternal unchanging *logos*. Our culture is ripe for a renewed revelation of Grace: The news that God is Love and Jesus is His Word and His Word will accomplish that for which He was sent. Already, we are embracing a new paradigm of time and eternity, which in turn transforms our discussion of Heaven and Hell. Modern (or post-modern) physics is giving us that paradigm, or perhaps I should say, it is giving back that paradigm, for it's the biblical paradigm. At the same time, we are undergoing a revolution in how we disseminate information. The Protestant Reformation was largely a product of the printing press. The internet is now granting seekers the ability to examine Scripture and historical theology with an unprecedented freedom that I hope will lead to a new reformation.

Ever since the fourth century AD, the theology of the western church has been largely conscripted by powerful human institutions like the Roman Empire—institutions with vested interest in control gained through threats of punishment. Many would argue that, until that time, the idea of God dispensing “unending conscious torment” was the minority opinion within the early church—a church that did not grow through the exercise of power and the threat of punishment, but through the romance of sacrificial Love. The romance of sacrificial Love involves pain. Human institutions are better at dispensing pain than bearing pain for others.

Scripture clearly states that God is Love and Jesus is the Truth. In this world, Truth in Love hurts. It is the crucifixion of Christ. His disciples are those who pick up a cross and follow.

Truth in Love hurts. Christ hurts. The Body of Christ, in this world, hurts. Yet it's through this sacrificial love that God “reconciles to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:19). It's through the work of God's Word hanging on a tree that creation is finished and everything is made good. He calls us to join in His work and share in His joy.

The proclamation of God's complete victory in Christ Jesus is a threat to the institutions of this world and the pride of human flesh. Yet, Truth in Love is the only doorway to the New Creation. He is "The Way." And He is the destination. God's complete victory in Christ Jesus is reality itself.

In the following paragraphs, I'd like to just offer some assistance in constructing this new mental paradigm—a biblical paradigm that allows for an eternal day in which everything is good. In the first section, "Exegetical Paradigms," I'll examine the three leading views of Hell in light of Scripture and offer a set of ideas that has led me to embrace the idea of redemption for all. In the next section, "Theology," I'll suggest a few ways in which the idea of redemption for all may relate to one's current theological system. In the last section, "Pastoral Care," I'll suggest some reasons as to why I think all of this matters.

Exegetical Paradigms

I. "Hell" (Endless Conscious Torment?)

It's rather shocking to discover that the modern American church has used this one term—"Hell"—to describe at least two very different biblical realities (*Hades* and The Fire) and perhaps the place where those two realities come together (*Gehenna*). A close examination of the terms seems to allow for some sort of temporal torment, but renders "endless conscious torment," not only unlikely, but untenable.

A. *Hades/Sheol*:

I believe that *Hades* is temporal. Scripture indicates that it will come to an End. *Hades* may very well last "forever," yet even "forever" (temporality as we know it, "*chronos*") comes to an End.

"*Hades*" is the normative Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Sheol*. In the Old Testament, *Sheol* is the realm of the dead... basically all dead (Psalm 89:48). People like Samuel and Jonah come up from *Sheol*. God raises things from *Sheol* (1 Samuel 2:6). The Psalmist speaks of his soul being brought up from *Sheol* (Psalm 30:3) or being "entangled" by the "cords of *Sheol*" (18:5). Job wants to hide from God's wrath in *Sheol* (Job 14:3). However, in Deuteronomy 32:22, God reveals that the fire of His

anger burns *even* to the depths of *Sheol*. God's fiery wrath does not appear to be the same thing as *Sheol*. Indeed, *Sheol* is considered a place to hide from God's fiery wrath.

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of a place of "outer darkness" into which "sons of the kingdom" are cast (Matt. 8:12). He also speaks of "The Son of Man" three days and three nights in the heart of the earth as Jonah was in the belly of the whale (*Sheol* – Jonah 2:2). He prophesies that the gates of Hades will not be able to withstand His Church (Matt. 16:18). When Christ dies on the cross, graves are opened in Jerusalem. Ezekiel had prophesied that God would raise "the whole house of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:11).

Ephesians 4:8 and 1 Peter 3:19 both seem to speak of Jesus descending and preaching in Hades. We state this in the Apostle's Creed. According to 2 Peter and Jude, angels appear to be kept in this place until the "judgment of the great day." Hades is at least a temporal reality. That is, it is a place in the flow of chronological time

In Revelation 20:13, "Death and Hades" are "thrown into the Lake of Fire." It seems that *Hades* CANNOT be the same thing as The Lake of Fire, if, in fact, God casts *Hades* into the Lake of Fire. Revelation 21:4 then states that, "Death shall be no more." It does not explicitly state that "*Hades*" will be no more, yet it seems understood by the text. And if it does exist after, outside of, or beyond this temporal experience it must not be a place of "death" for "death is no more." Scripture seems to indicate that *Hades* comes to an End in The Lake of Fire. It may be that even "temporality" ("*chronos*" – time as we experience it now) comes to an End in The Lake of Fire. As the Angel states in Rev. 10:6 (KJV), "Time (*chronos*) shall be no more.

Hades comes to an End.

B. The Fire:

"The Fire" (including the lake of fire, the pillar of fire, the fire Sodom, the burning bush, the fire in the temple, the fire that ignites *Gehenna*, the fire in Daniel's fiery furnace, and the fire of Pentecost) is eternal and in some way, Divinity Himself. By eternal, I mean beyond, or greater than, temporality and without end, because It/He is the End.

In Old Testament theophanies, God often appears as fire. "God IS a consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24). In Scripture, fire seems to belong to God in a special way. In Numbers 3, the sons of Aaron offer "unauthorized fire" before the Lord and suffer

punishment. In Revelation 13, the false prophet must be “allowed” to bring fire down from heaven. God “answers by fire” (1 Kings 18:24). Fire comes from Heaven to consume the sacrifices. In 2 Chronicles 7, fire comes down and consumes the sacrifices in the temple and fills the temple with glory. In Isaiah 6, the burning coal from the altar atones for sin and takes Isaiah’s guilt away. The fire was to be kept burning in the temple at all times. The sinners in Zion wonder, “*Who can dwell with the consuming fire?*” (Isaiah 33:14). Yet in Acts 2, the fire descends and fills the new Temple – the Church—and instead of “consuming” the sacrifices in pain, the fire fills the living sacrifices with joy – in fact, the very Spirit of God.

God is a consuming fire. His Word is “like fire” (Jeremiah 23:29). The Angel of Yahweh, Son of Man, appears as fire. Yet Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not burned by this fire as are the Babylonians. The whole earth will be consumed with God’s fire (Zephaniah 3:8). Yet, one day, the Lord Himself will be a wall of fire around Jerusalem and “the glory” in her midst (Zechariah 2:5). Glory is closely associated with fire. In biblical times, light was also closely associated with fire. God is light and “a fire.

Jesus came to baptize with fire. He transfigures into one who looks like He’s on fire. In the Revelation, His eyes are like a “flame of fire.” In Luke 12, Jesus states that He came to cast fire on the Earth and that He wished it were already kindled. In Acts 2, the fire falls and is experienced ecstatically. Paul tells us that in being kind we heap “burning coals” on the heads of our enemies (Romans 12:20), as if Love is Fire (Song of Solomon 8:6). Paul also speaks of persons being saved, “as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15). Peter teaches that our faith is refined like gold as through fire. In Mark 9:49, Jesus states that we will all be salted with fire. It seems that the same fire can consume some, purify others, and even fill some with ecstatic joy.

In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment” that is analogous to “eternal life.” The life is God’s and the fire is God’s. I think these five statements are true: God is Light; God is Holy; God is Fire; God is Love; God is One. I don’t think God changes. However, our experience of Him does. I don’t think He’s 25% light, 25% holy, 25% fire and 25% steadfast love. I don’t think He’s “merciful to a point” and then is no longer “steadfast love.” He is 100% Light, 100% Holy, 100% Fire, and 100% Steadfast Love, Mercy, Grace, *Hesed*. Jesus himself is our Judgment.

In the Revelation, the Lake of Fire is often referred to as the Lake of Fire and Brimstone. In the Old Testament, “brimstone” falls from the heavens and the breath of Yahweh is like brimstone (Isaiah 30:33). In the Revelation, the Greek word for “brimstone” is

“*theion*.” “*Theos*” is a Greek word rendered “God.” *Theion* is an adjective that can be used as a “substantive.” I am NO language scholar but according to the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*, “*theion*” can also be translated as “divine being.” Perhaps this lake is the “Lake of Fire and Divinity” or “Lake of Fire that is Divinity” (if the “*ka*” is epexegetical), or “Lake of Fire that burns with Divinity” (Rev. 19:20). Some would disagree, but whatever the case, it seems that “*theion*” is closely tied to “*Theos*.” Of course, the fire is eternal if the fire is in some sense divinity. The fire has no end because it is the End.

Torment for darkness is to be exposed to the Light. Torment for lies is to be exposed to Truth. Torment for death is to be exposed to Life. Torment for any impurity is to be exposed to the Consuming Fire. Because the agent of torment is eternal, it does not mean the experience of torment is unending. Sodom and Gomorrah underwent “the punishment of Eternal Fire” (Jude 7). This does not mean that Sodom and Gomorrah continually and without end experience the torment of Eternal Fire. Indeed, Ezekiel prophesies that Sodom and her daughters will be restored (Ez. 16:53-63).

—**The Fire** does not come to an End, for it is the End.

C. Gehenna:

It appears to me that Gehenna is the place where death (*Hades*) and impurity (sin) is consumed by the fire.

In Isaiah 30:33, we read that “the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, kindles” *Tophet*. *Tophet* is in the Valley of the Sons of *Hinnom*, which is *Gehenna*. This valley surrounds two sides of Jerusalem, yet Zechariah prophesied that one day the Lord would Himself be a wall of fire around the city. The Valley of *Hinnom* contains the Potter’s Field, which Jeremiah prophesied in, regarding the destruction and ultimate redemption of Jerusalem. The Potter’s Field was later purchased with the “blood money” Judas received and returned to the temple. It was purchased with Jesus’ Blood and then used as a burial place for Gentiles. Jeremiah prophesies that when Jerusalem is rebuilt, this valley of “dead bodies” will be included within the city itself (Jeremiah 31:40).

In ancient times, great abominations were committed in this valley. According to some, it was used as a trash dump. Perhaps *Gehenna* is like the ultimate trash dump and disposal service. Before entering the New Jerusalem, all must pass through the fire of *Gehenna*. We pass through judgment in Christ. “Now is the Judgment of this world” (John 12). His Spirit is fire. He baptizes with fire. The world is judged by fire. God,

Himself is the wall of fire around the heavenly city. The only way into the city is through Christ. Everything else will be destroyed.

Jesus said, “*Better to cut off the hand that causes you to sin (etc.) than to be thrown into Gehenna with it.*” At the cross, I am judged. I surrender my sin. Jesus cuts it out of me and bears it to destruction on my behalf. My sin hurts Jesus. Sin is devoured by the very substance of God—like dark is destroyed by Light; like lies are destroyed by Truth; like “unlove” is devoured by Love. The sin offering was burned outside the camp, outside the city walls (Hebrews 13:11).

Jesus was crucified just outside of the city walls, just as *Gehenna* lay just outside the city walls. The manifestation of Jesus (1 John 3:8, Acts 9:3, 2 Thess. 1:9, 2:8) destroys the work of the devil.

Hades comes to an End in **the Fire** of ***Gehenna***

Jesus is The End (1 Peter 4:7, Rev. 22:13).

II. Annihilation:

Some of these observations have led some (many modern evangelicals) to take the position that even if “Hell” is in some form unending (i.e. “Eternal Fire”), the experience of torment must not be unending. They argue that those who go to “Hell” are immediately or eventually annihilated and cease to exist. As I mentioned earlier, this was my view for years. I found it vastly more satisfying than some sort of endless conscious torment. Yet, I struggled to reconcile this view with key biblical texts.

Paul writes, “...as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22, Romans 6:15-21). “All” who die in Adam, are the same “all” that are made alive in Christ. For a time, I wondered if some people never died in Adam.

Well, if that were the case, one of two things must then be true. One: Some people never sinned and therefore never “died in Adam,” which would also mean there would then be no cause for annihilation. Or Two: These “people” had never “died in Adam” because they had never been made alive in Adam. In which case, they wouldn’t be people but only “shadows” of people; simply “vessels of wrath;” that is, *golem*—without a soul; those that do not contain the Breath (the Spirit) of God.

Jesus does refer to “sons of the evil one” (Matthew 13:38) and those that are “of” their “father the devil” (John 8:44). Yet, satan cannot create people. Jesus makes it clear in

the same verse that satan is the “father of lies.” Satan convinces each of us to create a “false self” (Ephesians 4:22-25). This was the original temptation in the Garden of Eden—“*Take from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the law) and make yourself in the image of God.*” The “self” we think we make is what Paul refers to as the “old Adam” or “old man.” This false self is truly a no self—one’s ego or pride or, perhaps even, “flesh” or “body of death.”

For a time, I reasoned that “annihilated” people must be these “people.” However, these “people” are really no people, so they can’t be truly annihilated people. Furthermore, each false person is dependent on a true person created by God, so annihilated “people” testify to redeemed, or God created, people—just as a shadow testifies to a light. I’ll mention more on this below.

Whatever the case, some certainly do “die in Adam.” This itself appears to be a form of annihilation and clearly, Scripture testifies to some heavy-duty annihilating (Jude 7, Gen. 19). However, wherever it testifies to some act of annihilation it also seems to testify somewhere to an act of re-creation (Ezekiel 16:53-63). In fact, annihilation appears to be a part of creation.

Until we “die in Adam” and are “made alive in Christ,” we are not fully created. Christ is the “first-born of all creation” and “first-born from the dead” (Col. 1:15,18). We are “finished” in Him. Indeed, salvation itself appears to be annihilation *and* creation: “*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self (man) was crucified with him, that our body of sin might be brought to nothing*” (Romans 6:5-6).

This appears to not only be the pattern for Christians but all humanity and indeed for all things. God “reconciles to himself all things, making peace by the blood of [Christ’s] cross” (Col. 1:20). In 2003 I published a commentary on *The Revelation*, having preached through the text for about year. At the end of that year, I couldn’t get around the statement that is spoken from the throne, upon which John saw the slaughtered lamb standing: “Behold I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). “All things” means all things.

The “destruction” of a thing does NOT seem to limit God’s ability to remake that thing. And things destroyed in chronological time may indeed show up in “God’s time.” In Scripture, “not ‘ever’” (never) appears to often mean, “not ‘age’” or not in this “age” (*aion*). Things inside the New Jerusalem are eternal (*aionios*) and things outside are temporal—they will be annihilated... and God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

Actually, Scripture seems fairly clear that “all things” will be annihilated (Zephaniah 3:8), but also fairly clear that “all things” will be made new (Zephaniah 3:9). Paul was the “chief of sinners.” According to Scripture, no one deserved annihilation more than Saul of Tarsus, and he was annihilated by the fiery presence of Jesus (Acts 9:3)—annihilated and created: “*It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.*” (Gal. 2:20).[1]

Nothing will ever close that wound," he answered, with a sigh. "It must eat into her heart! Annihilation itself is no death to evil. Only good where evil was, is evil dead. An evil thing must live with its evil until it chooses to be good. That alone is the slaying of evil. —George MacDonald, *Lilith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1895), p. 153

“Annihilation” seems to be no obstacle to the Creator, but an integral part of the act of creation—the creation of people in His own image.

III. Redemption For All:

Is it “Impossible?”

Scripture states that this is God’s desire (1 Tim. 2:1-6, 2 Peter 3:8-10). And Jesus tells us that with God, “all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). Paul tells us that God, “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). In numerous places, Scripture certainly seems to say that God will redeem all. This obviously seems to conflict with other texts, but even if the conflicts are insurmountable, how could I, or any believer, ever affirm that God desires the impossible?

Perhaps it *is* Possible.

If we can’t affirm that it is *impossible* for God to redeem all, then aren’t we affirming that it may at least be possible for God to redeem all? I think it certainly is. I try to stop short of dogmatic labels because the terms are so hard to define; our words never measure up to God’s reality, and we can never fully comprehend God’s judgments (Romans 11:32-33). I prefer to say, “Every knee will bow and every tongue give praise;” Jesus will “make all things new;” “As in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive;” Jesus is “the Savior of all men.” I prefer to say that, for that is just what Scripture says. I prefer to quote Scripture.

In conservative denominations, pastors are called to affirm the authority of Scripture but then taught there are certain texts (“inclusive texts”) you can only read if you then

proceed to immediately explain them away. In liberal denominations, you may preach those texts, but none of the texts are seen as very “authoritative.” I think it’s best to preach all Scripture as authoritative and “embrace mystery” when you can’t reconcile various passages.

I’ve found that many agree with that last statement, yet panic when they begin to see that the texts *CAN BE RECONCILED*. Indeed, I think that most can be, but in a way, that implies God will actually save all... and that seems to really worry some, which should make all ask this question: “Why do we not want what God wants?” (1 Tim.2:4).

Below, I have listed some of the “biblical considerations” which make it easier for me to see “eventual redemption for all” as a real possibility. Even if all these “considerations” are wrong or misguided, I still could not affirm that it is impossible for God to accomplish that which He says He wills. If it is possible for God to redeem all, and He wills to redeem all, then it seems to me that He may very well redeem all. Maybe we should even count on it; for if we don’t count on it, maybe we won’t want it when we get it. It’s the people that don’t want other people to be saved, the people who find them selves offended at Grace, whom Jesus warns of outer darkness (Matt. 20:15, Luke 15:28).

A. Jesus preaches in Hades: Scripture rather strongly indicates that Jesus preached in Hades and led a host of captives free. He came to seek and to save the “lost” (Luke 19:10). The Greek, translated “lost,” is *apollumi* also translated “perished” and “destroyed.” I don’t see a good biblical reason to say that Jesus can no longer save the “lost” in Hades. The story of the rich man and Lazarus indicates that there is a chasm that none can cross; however, Jesus appears to have crossed it or leveled it in His death and resurrection.

B. Destroyed Things that Come Back: In Scripture, destroyed and damned things sometimes come back. Sodom is the premiere example of the destructive power of God’s fiery judgment; however, Ezekiel prophesies: “Sodom and her daughters will return to their former state” (Ezekiel 16: 55). Ezekiel doesn’t just prophesy this about Sodom but also Samaria and Jerusalem. Jerusalem will be destroyed like Sodom, yet God will restore her as well.

God is not simply restoring a city when He restores Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is made up of redeemed people. Jeremiah prophesied in the Potter’s field that Jerusalem would be broken like a shattered pot, broken so that she could not be mended (Jeremiah 19:11). Yet, we know God is an astounding potter who does wondrous things with

“earthen vessels” like us and He’s certainly not through with Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 37, Israel is “clean cut off” in a valley of dry bones. However, the bones come to life. Those bones are “the whole house of Israel.” In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” What happened to the old Paul? He was destroyed, and yet he lives.

C. The Old Man and the New Man: Scripture indicates that I have an “old man” (like old Paul) and a “new man.” Perhaps I am “wheat” and a “tare.” Perhaps I am a “vessel of wrath” and a “vessel of mercy.” I was once a child of wrath “like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3). Is my earthen vessel destroyed while I remain, such that I am destroyed and yet saved? Does my earthen vessel form the mold, which gets filled with the liquid gold of God’s Mercy, such that my old self of sin is replaced by the love that is God’s very life poured into me? Is the new me, the inverse of an obverse—that is the old, empty me—full of self and sin? Does the form of God’s Grace take the unique form of my sin, such that one day I will look like me but be solid gold? Is my false self the stage for the revelation of my true self, Christ in me (Eph. 4:20-25)?

In Isaiah 66:23, “all flesh” comes to the New Jerusalem to worship. In verse 24, they all go out and look on the “dead bodies of the men that have rebelled.” When we study Isaiah, we realize that he clearly states that all people, including all Israel, have rebelled. Therefore, “all flesh” look into *Gehenna* and see “all bodies.” Whose bodies are “all flesh” looking at, if not their own?

When we take an honest look at Matthew 25 and our Lord’s description of Judgment, we each must confess that we are both sheep and goat, or else we do terrible violence to the text. Who has never “visited a sick person” or never neglected to “visit a sick person”? Christ’s word makes us realize we are both sheep and goat. It cuts us (*krisis*) in two. We must cry out for mercy, for we realize that part of us must go into the Eternal Fire, while part of us is a fragrant offering (gift). We look to the throne and behold “a Lamb standing as if it had been slain.” Jesus describes Judgment in Matt. 25, then the next sentence reads, “*When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.’*”

I don’t believe that Jesus is telling a simple story of some sheep and goats. He taps into thousands of years of complex temple sacrifices even as He looks at the temple, prophesying its destruction and revealing that He will rebuild it in three days, fulfilling all the ceremonial law. Every good work in me is Him: the fragrant offering, the sacrificial

Lamb. He pays for every sin in me: He is my sin offering (Numbers 28 – one male goat) and my scapegoat. He is my Passover lamb (to be taken “from the sheep or from the goats,” Ex. 12:5). He is my sheep and He is my goat. He is my Judgment. Both sheep and goat are sacrificed in one fire. God is One. God is Fire and God is Eternal Life.

D. Time and Eternity: “*Aion*” (forever, age, etc.) and “*Aionios*” (of the age, eternal, forever) appear to be very difficult words to translate out of the Greek. Even if we translate them correctly, we don’t even know what our translation means. Is “eternal” the same as “forever” or the opposite of “forever”? Is it all time or the absence of time? I don’t think most people have considered what Einstein’s laws of relativity imply, let alone the eternal nature of God who spoke space and time into existence. We speak about “eternal” things and things that “last forever” but have not specified our terms.

I suspect that “*aionios*” can loosely be translated “eternal” (as in “timeless” or “all time at once”) and that “*aion*” can be translated “age” or “ever” (as in “all time” or “all chronological time in order”). Eternal things can’t end because they are not bound by time (chronological time). Perhaps I should say they can’t end because they are the End. Jesus is The End. I AM is The End. The Fire is The End. “World without end” is the world full of Jesus who will “fill all things” (Eph. 4:10) and is Himself The End.

The “ages,” the “evers,” and the “*aions*” do come to an end (*The End*). Hebrews 9:26 states, “*But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages (aion) to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*” 1 Cor. 10:11 makes it clear that “the end of the ages (*aion*) has come” upon us. At the cross, the Eternal Judgment of God invaded time. I believe that there is one judgment and that Judgment is Jesus revealed and enthroned on the cross (John 12:31). We may encounter Judgment in time, at the end of our time, or at the end of all time, but no one gets to the Father or to the eternal city except through Christ and His Cross. Eph. 1:9-10 explains it as, “...the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite (*anakephalaiosasthai* – unite under one head) all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” Col. 1:19-20 adds that, “*In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*”

We have developed unbiblical (dare I say, absurd) eschatological systems because we have tried to adapt Scripture to the space-time cosmology of modernism. I think this has been a tremendous failure and a disservice to the text. Ironically, this modern world is no longer modern and physicists are saying that a modernistic view of space and time is no

longer valid scientifically. We live in an age where we can take the cosmology of Scripture quite literally and be entirely scientific in doing so. However, to do so we must re-examine our old modern ways of thinking, taking extra care with words like eternity, forever, never, and always.

Considering the nature of time and eternity (perhaps, “*chronos*” and “*kairos*”), it becomes apparent that some things may last “forever” yet not be “eternal.” Perhaps one may suffer in “Hell” (*Hades*) forever (all time), yet be redeemed in eternity. We each suffer on earth some time and yet are redeemed in eternity. “The Jerusalem above” IS “our mother” (Galatians 4:26) and we are “seated with Him in the heavenly places,” (Eph2:6) even though now, in time, we also suffer in this “body of death.”

E. Evil as Absence: Once we wrap our head around the idea of eternity, we might ask, “How could something ‘exist’ forever, or ‘exist’ in time at all, yet not exist, somehow, in eternity?” If that seems too esoteric, let’s put it the opposite way around. “How can God make all things new? What does it mean to make evil new, darkness new, death new, lies new, destruction new, chaos new or even my ‘old Adam’ new?”

Well, maybe those “things” are really no “things:” nothing. That’s not to dismiss evil, but to shed light on evil. Evil is an absence of Good. Darkness is an absence of Light. Death is an absence of Life. Lies are an absence of Truth. Lost-ness (“destruction” *apollumi*, *apoleia*) is an absence of the Way. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the Light of the World and “God alone is Good.

Scripture clearly indicates that God in Christ Jesus will “fill all things” (1 Cor. 15:28; Eph. 1:23; 4:6, 10; Is. 11:9), which clearly implies that “all things” are in some way empty of some “thing” and that thing is the Word of God. When God fills all things:

- Evil is destroyed by The Good.
- Darkness is destroyed by the Light.
- Death is destroyed by the Life.
- Lies are destroyed by the Truth.
- Lost-ness is destroyed by the Way.

Are these no “things” destroyed... or made new... or both? When Christ destroys the “work of the devil,” is it still the “work of the devil” or the creation of God? When desecration becomes creation, is that annihilation or redemption or both. Human words fail at this point. But when God fills all things:

- Chaos is destroyed by *Logos*.
- Temporality is filled with Eternity.
- My judgments are filled with God's Judgment.
- Sin is filled with Grace.
- "I Am not" is filled with "I Am."
- My "old man" is replaced by my "New Man."
- It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.
- A "vessel of wrath" (see Eph. 2:3) becomes a "vessel of Mercy."
- *"In the very place it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God' (Romans 9:26).*

If God really does fill all things, it appears that everything, that's anything, is made new... and even "nothing" becomes "something."

If satan is a something, I suspect he will be made new. If satan is the presence of an absence—if he is a nothing—I suspect he'll be filled with the something: the Consuming Fire that is God. Satan was a "murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). He is "the father of lies." He is not the father of people, but "false people," whom Jesus the Truth does not know. Jesus said, "there is no truth in him." He is the presence of an absence of Truth—the prince of darkness.

The satanic trinity, devil, beast and false prophet, will be thrown in the "lake of fire and *theion*" and they will be tormented for "ages and ages" (Rev. 20:10). However, Jesus is "the end" of the ages and all things (Rev. 20:13). And on us, "the end of the ages" has come (1 Cor. 10:11). "The end of the ages" happened, when "he put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26). We died with him.

The Lake of Fire is "the second death" (Rev. 21:8). It is the death of death. We were "dead in our trespasses and the un-circumcision of our flesh" (Eph. 2:1,5 Col. 2:13), "when God made us alive together with [Christ]," destroying our "old man" and giving us eternal life, His own life. If we "share in the first resurrection" (Rev. 20:6); if we "conquer" with Christ (Rev. 2:11); if we "believe in the son" (John 3:36); if we have died with Him and have risen with Him; if we hear His word and believe, we have "passed from death to life" (John 5:24). "Over such the second death has no power" (Rev. 20:6).

Why???? Because... We have already died to self and are eternally alive. The first death must be the death of the body, and the second death is the death of the soul—the old Adam, pride, the "me" that I think I have created, my false self. A believer dies the

second death before the first, but this does not mean that an unbeliever can't die the second death after the first and be made alive in Christ Jesus. How else could a man like Moses, sent to *Sheol* for disobedience, stand on the Mount of Transfiguration in the Promised Land next to a Jesus burning brighter than the sun? Jesus is "the Life" and the death of death, for all time.

When God fills all things with His Word, who is Jesus our Lord, shadows will be transformed into Light, lies will be transformed into Truth, all our sin will become a demonstration of God's Righteousness in Christ: evil will be transformed into good AND our old man will be transformed into the New—Creation is "finished." That transformation may be described in different ways, yet I believe that transformation is called redemption. Whatever the case, our "nothing" is filled with God's something—the presence of "I am."^[2]

F. The "Inclusive" Passages: In numerous passages, Scripture seems to say that "all" will be redeemed. In numerous passages, Scripture also seems to say that some won't be redeemed. In light of the considerations above and through the process of studying these texts more carefully, I've found that it's easier for me to understand the "exclusive passages" in light of the "inclusive passages" rather than the other way around.

There are too many "inclusive texts" to consider them all here, but the ones that are most convincing to me are those that come at central points of theological discourse, those that are affirmed with declaratory statements like "truly I say," and those that are affirmed by the theological and linguistic context.

The following are some of the "inclusive texts" that I deem most difficult or impossible to explain in an "exclusive" sense:

- **Genesis 1:31** "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."
- **Isaiah 45:22-23 (and parallel passages: Romans 14:11 Philippians 2:10)** "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'"

The context is clearly salvation and not forced submission. This is affirmed by the New Testament parallels.

- **John 12:30-32** Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

As the next verse explains, Jesus is here speaking of His crucifixion. I consider this to be a key verse for understanding judgment and God’s redemptive purposes. If the “all” (panta) in verse 32 doesn’t mean “all,” it must mean something else. I can’t figure out what that “something else” would be. This is a problem with numerous similar texts containing “all” or “every.”

- **Romans 5:15-19** But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

This appears to be a central theological statement for Paul as it is repeated in 1 Corinthians 15. The “alls” and the “manys” are in parallel and amplified by the “much more.” Karl Barth wrote Christ and Adam as an exegesis of this text. I recommend it highly.

- **Romans 11:32** For God has consigned **all** to disobedience, that he may have mercy on **all**.

This text seems to be the absolute pinnacle of Paul’s theology in Romans.

- **1 Corinthians 15:22** For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

This text repeats Romans 5. The “all” who die in Adam are the “all” who are made alive in Christ. I have a hard time understanding how “all” wouldn’t mean “all.” I’ve wondered if

some don't die in Adam, such that some would not be made alive in Christ, such that some might be mere vessels of wrath made for destruction and without a soul. This may raise all sorts of anthropological problems and exegetical issues, but in my mind it is the only possible option other than the obvious meaning of salvation for all.

- **Colossians 1:15-20** He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The “alls” are in parallel here. If I try to make them say anything other than “all,” I am entirely out of Orthodox Christian tradition.

- **1 Timothy 4:9-11** The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things.
- **Revelation 5:11-14** Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and **all** that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

I have wondered if this “all” might only be the “all” alive at that time. However, this hardly fits the context of the opening of the seven-sealed scroll. And furthermore, they praise the Lamb that was slain and join the elders who praise the lamb because he “ransomed people for God” (v.9). These creatures seem to be aware that the lamb ransomed them. Even if it is only those alive at “this time,” it seems clear that “Hades” has ceased to exist.

- **Revelation 21:5** And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

I am very uncomfortable arguing that “all things” really isn’t “all things,” especially when God the Father or the resurrected Christ speaks from the throne saying, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” After this scene, there are those portrayed as outside the New Jerusalem and therefore not “new,” but to be outside the “New Jerusalem” is to be still stuck in this current age that will come to an End.

These “inclusive texts” do not exclude the “exclusive texts.” However, I think they do demand that we give them more attention and that we at least be willing to question any theological box that simply explains them away.

G. Inscrutable Judgments: “How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways” (Romans 11:33). Paul writes this just after writing, “God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all” and just before writing, “for from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” If Scripture is clear that I can’t understand His judgments, how can I conclude that God cannot save all people based on my understanding of His judgments? However, if Scripture reveals, or seems to reveal, that He will redeem all people, I should at least consider it possible, even if I don’t understand *how* something could be destroyed, condemned, or judged and yet live.

Romans 11:33 demands that we embrace a certain degree of mystery in the biblical text. This is true in affirming the “inclusive texts,” yet also true in affirming the “exclusive texts.” I feel uncomfortable with a label like “Universalist” because I don’t know what it means (sometimes it means just the opposite of everything I stand for). I also want to avoid dogmatic labels regarding an area of theology that embraces the topic of God’s Judgments. I want to destroy false theological boxes, but be very cautious about constructing new ones. Karl Barth rejected the titles “Universalist” and “*apokatastasis*” because they seemed to imply that God must save “all” when, in fact, salvation is always God’s gracious choice in Christ. I understand the sentiment, but if Christ says that He makes “all things new,” I do think we can say that He makes “all things new.” Call that what you will; we’re simply quoting a judgment spoken from the throne.

The idea that people have been very dogmatic about “unending conscious torment” is a bit horrifying to me. “With the Judgment you pronounce you will be judged,” said Jesus

(Matt. 7:1). It should absolutely terrify us to announce that there are some that God is “unable or unwilling” to save, let alone, some that God will intentionally torture without end. In Scripture, God’s Wrath OR the experience of God’s Wrath as wrath comes to an end: *teleo* (Rev. 15:1, also Is. 57:16, Jer. 3:12, Lam. 3:31). Yet, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end” (Lam. 3:22). “His steadfast love endures forever.” That phrase is repeated 42 times in my Bible (ESV).[3]

Scripture is clear that “*Love never ends*” (1 Cor. 13:8) and we cannot fully understand God’s judgments. Therefore, we must not limit the extent of God’s Mercy with our formulations of His Judgment. In Romans 11:32-33 Paul writes, “*For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways!*” Is it not strange that people often argue that God cannot have mercy on all because we understand His judgments? John teaches that God is Mercy (*hesed*) and Jesus (*yeshua*, “Yahweh is Salvation”) is His Judgment (1 John 4:8, John 1:9, 3:19, 8:12). We can’t comprehend His Judgment, but His Judgment comprehends us; it saves us.

If we are going to be dogmatic at all; if we are going to judge at all; if we are going to hand out “measures” at all, let’s hand out Grace. Jesus is the “measure” I want to give. Jesus is the Judgment I’m called to pronounce. “*Now is the Judgment of this world...*” (John 12:31). I’m called to announce that Judgment: Jesus Christ and Him Crucified—Outrageous Love.

H. The Direction of Our Hope and the 7th day: To me, Scripture seems abundantly clear on this point (1 Tim. 2:1-6, 2 Peter 3:8-10, etc.). If there are two possibilities in Scripture regarding ultimate redemption and two possibilities in any one person’s story regarding ultimate redemption, we are to always hope for and desire redemption. Paul writes that “Hope does not disappoint us.” Indeed, our hope is a finished and eternal reality. “It is Finished,” said Jesus, as He hung on the tree in a garden (John 19:30,41) at the end of the sixth day of the week.

Man (Adam) is created on the sixth day of creation. On the seventh day, everything is good. There is no place for evil, death or *Hades*. In Genesis 2:5, it’s clear that the narrative returns to at least day six as the text goes on to describe the creation of Adam. Scripture claims that Jesus is “first-born of all creation” and “first-born from the dead” (Col. 1:15,18; Rev. 1:5). That means that no one is “finished” in God’s image until Jesus

cries, "It is finished" and God raises Him, the "eschatos Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45) from the grave.

This clearly implies that until we receive "eternal life" from Christ, we are still living in the 6th day of creation and the 7th day is yet to come. A Christian is one who experiences 7th day rest in the soul, even while the body exists in the 6th day. In Scripture, we're commanded to live in a seven-day rhythm that culminates in rest, to commemorate God's rest on the Seventh Day. In John 5:17, Jesus said, "My Father is working still." His rest is eternal. God's rest lies beyond the flow of temporal reality, and Jesus is the Door to the 7th day.

As I point out in my book *The History of Time and the genesis of you*, this isn't only a Scriptural observation, but an implication of modern physics. It means that we are still being created on the 6th day. The cross, then, is not a test to see IF we may be created in the image of God. Jesus and His cross are HOW we are created in the image of God. And our Hope is an eternal reality being realized in space and time through Christ Jesus, the Word of God.

We will all arrive on the 7th day when "Everything is Good." The Word of God will accomplish that for which He was sent (Is. 55:11). God said, "*Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness*" (Gen. 1:26). "*And God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good*" (Gen. 1:31). After the opening of the 7th seal, after the 7th trumpet, 7th thunder and 7th bowl (from the throne In Revelation 21:5), we hear "*Behold I make all things new.*"

Jesus rose from the dead on the eighth day, which is the first day. In Hebrew thought, the eighth day (Lev. 23:26) represents an eternal seventh day. In Genesis 2:1-3 there is no "evening and morning" on the Seventh Day. It's an eternal day (Zechariah 14:7). On that day "Everything is very good."

So, Will God Redeem All? I've lived with some of these thoughts for decades and all of them for the last decade as I've preached my way through Scripture. Currently, I am unaware of any passage in Scripture that contradicts this statement: God will redeem everybody that's anybody.

If it's possible that God will redeem all and Scripture so blatantly claims that He will "fill all," "have mercy on all," "reconcile all," and "is the savior of all" who "makes all things new," then what keeps a person from saying that God will redeem all?

I don't know—except perhaps that we don't want God to redeem some or forgive some, which, according to Scripture, is the one thing that will not be forgiven: the unforgivable sin. We must “pay back” our arrogance and ingratitude with gratitude. Endless resentment, hatred, and bitterness will not be allowed. Lack of faith in Grace will not be forgiven but must be redeemed.

So, will God Redeem All? I believe that the correct answer is... **YES!**

Theology

The Integrity of God:

Scripture reveals that “God is one.” He is not part Love and part the opposite of Love – something we call “wrath” or “justice.” He is not divided. If God predestines some to unending torment and some to endless bliss due to no merit of their own, it would seem that God ultimately has two purposes: to exhibit mercy to some and the opposite of mercy to others. This is a profoundly difficult proposition on many levels: philosophical, exegetical, theological, existential and emotional – our Father in heaven becomes a monster.

And, if one argues that God doesn't choose to save us (predestination), but that we must choose to be saved, our will becomes our own savior. Even more, God, who knows the end from the beginning, becomes the creator of beings whom He knows will cause endless suffering and He will endlessly torture. Our Father in heaven becomes a sadist and a masochist.

Calvinism and Arminianism:

I am a Calvinist who has a hard time believing in “limited atonement.” The Scriptural evidence for an unlimited atonement seems fairly convincing to me (especially 1 John 2:2). Arguments for a “limited atonement” appear to be an effort to make sure that some folks are destroyed or tortured in Hell without end.

It's tragically fascinating to me: Calvinists affirm that God is all-powerful, but not all loving (willing that some suffer endless torment). Arminians affirm that God is all loving but not all-powerful (unable to save some from endless torment – He wills that their will would be stronger than His will). Calvinists tolerate Arminians, and Arminians tolerate Calvinists, but neither tolerates those who tolerate both.

In other words, one may believe that God is all loving or one may believe that God is all-powerful, but if one believes that God is both all-powerful and all-loving, he or she is accused of heresy, because he or she can no longer subscribe to a doctrine of endless torment.

Thomas Talbot points out that, logically speaking, it is impossible to subscribe to the following three propositions at once:

- God is all loving.
- God is all-powerful.
- Hell is endless torment.

Calvinists (Presbyterians, Reformed, some Baptists, etc.) find ways to “fudge” on the first proposition. Arminians (Most Baptists, Methodists, etc.) find ways to “fudge” on the second. I advocate eliminating the last. We don’t even have to “fudge.” Endless Torment is an unbiblical doctrine.

Liberals and Conservatives: The modern western church is divided between liberals and conservatives. On the left, many would gladly embrace these ideas but not hold to a high view of Scripture. They like to talk about “love,” but love without truth isn’t love. On the right, many hold to a high view of Scripture, but are so deeply committed to a cultural Christianity that they can’t seem to comprehend the biblical text – “God is Love.” They like to talk about “truth,” but truth without love isn’t truth. We need the Truth spoken in Love. Romans 11:32, “God consigned all to disobedience.” The truth is that we’re all far worse than we ever imagined. “God consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” And we’re all more loved than we could even begin to comprehend.

Justice: The reconciliation of all things in Christ Jesus implies that “Hell” is not simply retributive but remedial and restorative. God’s Judgment is not established through endless torture. Endless torture implies that God’s Justice is endlessly frustrated, in which case, His Judgment would never be established and He would never be satisfied. God’s Judgment is established and revealed at the cross, where “it is finished.”

Justice is not “people getting what they deserve.” If it were, there would be no justice, for people deserve nothing. How could a created being deserve anything? What would a created being deserve it with? Justice is not “people getting what they deserve.” Justice is “God getting what God deserves.” And what does God deserve? He deserves people made in His own image. How does God accomplish justice? He accomplishes justice

through Jesus Christ, His Word. We are created by God with His Word. Salvation is agreeing to your own creation. Salvation is Faith in Grace and by Grace. We are justified (made right) by Faith.

The idea that God's Justice is established through the endless torture of creatures that He has made is an unbiblical notion handed down to us from the Middle Ages. (*The One Purpose of God* by Jan Bonda is a marvelous resource in this area.) It's no wonder that modern believers see God's Judgment as a bad thing, when in the Old Testament it is the very best thing. Indeed, in the New Testament, we find that God's Judgment is Jesus. Thus, "Hell" (*Hades* or *Sheol*) is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. (The Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory is a nod in this direction.) "Hell" is not the end. Jesus is the End. And that's God's Justice.

Historical Theology: I realize that I'm just a guy that went to Fuller Seminary. I'm not a language scholar or a great theologian. I also realize that many would disagree with things I've suggested. Therefore, it's been important to me to know that some well-respected theological minds have honored Scripture and argued in the same direction as me. I have not raised these issues because of these theologians, but because of the biblical text that I'm called to preach. Nonetheless, it's been encouraging to know that many of the things I've suggested have also been advocated by great theologians like Karl Barth, recent Popes, and popular theologians like George MacDonald, William Barclay and CS Lewis.

Lewis didn't affirm the reconciliation of all, but he did affirm its possibility. I've also been encouraged by the fact that several of the early church fathers, who spoke the language of the New Testament as their mother tongue, argued in much the same direction: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa, to name a few. Recently, Ilaria Ramelli finished a massive scholarly treatise on this topic titled *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis, A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*. [Watch my interview of Ilaria [HERE](#)] A brilliant and much shorter treatment of the theology of the Church Fathers can be found in *The Inescapable Love of God* by Thomas Talbott. I've found Talbott's book to be the best single resource on these matters. Another favorite resource is the website of Tentmaker Ministries. Click [HERE](#) to visit.

Pastoral Care

Some people ask, “Why does all this theology matter?” I hope we see that it not only helps us understand Scripture— it changes the way we breathe. Do we breathe in terror? Or faith, hope, and love? Do you live as an orphan and worse – the child of a sadistic father? Or do you live as the child of a Father who would give everything, and has given everything, to make you in His image and bring you home?

Some people ask, “Why does this matter?” I’m still rather shocked that anyone would ask. Nevertheless, this is why I bring the topic up; this is why I long for a new reformation, why I think it matters:

1. I want us to live to the praise of God’s Glory revealed in Christ Jesus. I think we have underestimated the sufficiency and power of Christ’s work of redemption on the cross. In American Evangelicalism, we do this in the name of “free will,” which I believe diminishes the sovereign and gracious choice of God. In this way, we claim merit for our own redemption. Thus, we “serve” God out of a carnal sense of “responsibility” (which is to not serve God) rather than serving Him as an act of worship, which is the “chief end of man” (*Westminster Confession, Larger Catechism*).

2. I want us to stop idolizing our “free will.” I am concerned that we, American believers, have come to view life as a great competition. We say that we are saved by grace, but what we mean is that we are saved by our “good choices” or the quality of our will. I don’t believe that we have a “good free will” – a will that freely wills the good – until God grants us “free will” through His Grace. “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy” (Romans 9:16).

3. I want us to start glorifying Jesus and stop worshipping “Me-sus.” The name “Jesus” means “God is Salvation” or “God is Help.” In the garden the snake tempted all of us to be our own helper, to take knowledge of the Good from the tree in order to make ourselves in the image of God; he tempted us to save ourselves; he tempted us to faith in “Me-sus,” “Me is Salvation,” rather than Jesus, “God is Salvation.” We took the life of the Good on a tree called the cross, but God gave the life of the Good on the same tree. That’s Grace. I want us to have faith by Grace in Jesus. I want us to die to ourselves and live to him.

4. I want us to stop competing with each other and the world. When we view life as a competition and judgment as the finish line, when we compare ourselves to each other and measure ourselves against each other, when we judge each other and ourselves, when we suspect that God grades on a curve we need losers so that we can feel like winners. We need failures to define ourselves as successful. We need scapegoats. We already have a scapegoat. One has lost that we all might win. If I have any emotional stake in any other human being suffering in “Hell” other than Jesus, I probably do not understand the Gospel... He suffered “Hell” for me.

5. I want us to preach biblically. I am concerned that we no longer wrestle with the biblical text and, therefore, end up preaching societal convention. My understanding is that we are to be “reformed and always reforming”(this was a seminal statement defining the reformation) as the living Word leads us in expositing the written word. Expository preaching has forced me to wrestle with numerous texts that I would have otherwise dismissed.

6. I want us to be honest. I have faith that the Truth sets us free and that we can only arrive at the Truth by being truthful. I do not believe I serve the Kingdom by hiding my questions but by being honest. I also believe in the “Priesthood of all believers.” All believers are called to wrestle with The Word. I do not need to protect the church from The Word. Some have told me this is my job. I believe it’s a Pharisee’s job.

7. I don’t want people to go to Hell. By “Hell” I mean both Hades and *Gehenna* (where the rebellious are consumed by the Eternal Punishment and Fire). I know that no one’s salvation is dependent on me, yet I believe that God has called me to participate in the proclamation and plan of His redemption. In the Gospels, it becomes very clear that those who are most in danger of being cast into outer darkness are the “Sons of the Kingdom,” those who struggle with the extent of God’s Mercy in Christ. I don’t want anyone to be cast into the outer darkness whether for three days or several million years. Furthermore, I do not want them to be devoured by Fire on the Day of Judgment. I want all people to see the glory of God in Christ Jesus NOW, no matter how long “forever” is.

8. I want us to serve God out of Love rather than fear. I am to preach the gospel as an act of worship, not because I arrogantly think that God “needs me.” I am to obey him out of Love, not because I’m afraid that He might torture me in Hell. To serve God out of dreadful fear is to serve God out of faithlessness. Whatever does not proceed from faith

is sin. Fear is the beginning of wisdom, but perfect love casts out fear. I want us to be perfected in love.

9. I want us to love our enemies. This is immensely hard, yet it appears that we only love Jesus as much as we love “the least of these.” By asking the question: “What if they all are saved?” we are forced to examine our hearts. I’m concerned that for some, possible redemption for all is viewed as terrible news, rather than gospel – great news. Are we hanging on to resentment, hatred, and unforgiveness? Jesus said, “If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:15). I think Scripture is fairly clear: un-forgiveness is the unforgiveable sin. You must “pay” for un-forgiveness with forgiveness, and of course that forgiveness is already for-given you in Jesus.

10. I want us to trust the heart of our Heavenly Father. “Jesus from the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known.” If someone were to tell one of my children that I had other children that I planned to torture in unspeakable torment forever and ever without end, it would create some serious doubt about my character in the heart of my child. It would also fill me with intense wrath for the person that said such a thing. However, if someone told my child that I had other children that I disciplined in Love (even severely), it would create an entirely different response in me, and my child.

If Scripture is not exceedingly clear about “unending conscious torment with the wrath of God,” we better not say such things. I know that it may be a way to “win” converts at evangelistic rallies, but I can think of nothing else that would infuriate me more as a father than to be misrepresented in such a way. Obviously, God is not determined by my anthropomorphic views of fatherhood; however, He calls himself “Father” for a reason. Perhaps “Hell” is not retributive, but remedial. That makes sense to a Father’s heart.

11. I want others to trust the heart of our Heavenly Father. I want them to trust Jesus. If I were to ask most unbelievers why they did not WANT to believe in the “Christian God,” I think the first answer given would probably be something like: “I can’t believe in a god that would eternally torture a junior high kid who died in a bicycle accident just because he didn’t say the sinner’s prayer or believe that God had forgiven him.” I’ve always explained God’s prerogative to do so in the way we evangelicals have been trained, but maybe we’ve been defending a picture of God that is not honoring to God and deceptive to unbelievers. God is a Consuming Fire. Yes, He will discipline us severely at times. But Yes, He is always Love. And He always loves you more than you

are even able to love yourself. “God is Salvation.” In a word: Jesus. And you can trust Him.

12. Regardless of what “I want,” it matters because Scripture says it matters. Faith in Grace utterly transforms the way we live—a few examples:

Mathew 28:19-20a “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority (power) in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore...’”

THEREFORE GO: BECAUSE YOU KNOW THAT “GOD IS SALVATION,” JESUS, HAS ALL AUTHORITY

Matthew 28: 20 “Go therefore and make disciples of (disciple) all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”

1 Timothy 1:9-10 “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive,”

WHY DO YOU TOIL AND STRIVE PAUL?

1 Timothy 1:11 “because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially those who believe.”

2 Corinthians 5:14a “...the love of Christ controls us,”

WHY DOES THE LOVE OF CHRIST CONTROL US?

2 Corinthians 5:14b-15 “because we are convinced of this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might not longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”

1 Corinthians 15: 22-58a “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive... that God may be all in all... For this perishable body must put on the imperishable... Oh death where is your victory? ... But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore...”

THEREFORE—BECAUSE YOU NOW KNOW THAT JESUS WINS!

1 Corinthians 15:58 “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

Romans 11: 32-12:1a “For God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all. Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has first given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. I appeal to you therefore...”

THEREFORE—BECAUSE YOU KNOW THAT GOD IS SO VERY GOOD!

Romans 12:1 “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual (logical) worship.”

Yes, God can be terrifying. Yes, He is the ultimate threat to one’s pride. But He is Good. The Holy Fire is Good. The altar is a door. The other side of the curtain is the new creation. So may you trust your Creator and present yourself a living sacrifice. May you love, because He first loved you.

Endnotes

[1] Even for those who have rejected their election, "there is still the prospect of it," suggests Barth, "even if in endless remoteness and depth." God's punishment "is not an end in itself." God still offers something "by and beyond destruction." "What is meant," explains Barth, "is obviously the eschatological possibility, salvation on the day of the Lord. This does not remove or weaken the punishment, but it gives it a limit which encloses even that which is boundless in itself, eternal fire" (II/2, p. 486). . . . The wrath of God revealed from heaven (Rom. 1:18) is not split off from the rest of the divine life. It is a manifestation of God's saving righteousness. It is actually intrinsic, states Barth, to "the judicial sentence by which those Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ are acquitted and justified. This sentence is itself annihilating in its action" (II/2, p. 487).

Note that here Barth obviously accepts a form of annihilationism. Unlike Stott's version, it foresees not an annihilation for the few or for the many, but for all. It is an annihilation in which the only possible hope for anyone is the faith given and received by grace. This annihilation excludes all humankind, Barth comments, "from any freedom or justification

except those that come by faith. It judges human beings absolutely. It utterly abandons them. It burns them right down to faith, as it were, that there it may promise and give them as believers both freedom and justification" (II/2, p. 487, rev.).—George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 246

[2] On this shadow side the creature is contiguous to nothingness, for this "not" is at once the expression and frontier of the positive will, election and activity of God. When the creature crosses the frontier from the one side, and it is invaded from the other, nothingness achieves actuality in the creaturely world. . . . Nothingness is that which God does not will. . . . This being which is alien and adverse to grace and therefore without it, is that of nothingness. . . . And this is evil in the Christian sense, namely, what is alien and adverse to grace. . . .

The grace of God is the basis and norm of all being, the source and criterion of all good. Measured by this standard, as the negation of God's grace, nothingness is intrinsically evil. . . . He knows nothingness. He knows that which He did not elect or will as the Creator. He knows chaos and its terror. He knows its advantage over His creature. He know how inevitably it imperils His creature. Yet He is Lord over that which imperils His creature. Against Him, nothingness has no power of its own. And He has sworn fidelity to His threatened creature. In creating it He has covenanted and identified Himself with it. . . . And therefore it is He as the first and true and indeed the only man, as the Helper who really takes the creature's place, lifting from it all its need and labour and problem and placing them upon Himself, as the Warrior who assumes the full responsibility of a substitute and suffers and does everything on its behalf. In the light of this merciful action of God, the arrogant delusion of the creature that it is called and qualified to help and save and maintain itself in its infinite peril is shown to be evil as well as foolish and unnecessary. . . .

As God takes action on its behalf, the creature itself is summoned and empowered. It has no arrogant illusion as to its own authority or competence. It really trusts in God, perseveres in His covenant and chooses His help as the only effective good. . . .

If our thought is conditioned by the obedience of Christian faith, we have only one freedom, namely, to regard nothingness as finally destroyed and to make a new beginning in remembrance of the One who has destroyed it.

-Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, A selection with introduction by Helmet Golwitzer (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 137-138, 140- 141, 143, 145-146

[3] “Annihilationism” is certainly more appetizing for a kind heart than endless conscious torment, yet it’s still left with the same handicaps. If one insists that things annihilated in time cannot be made new in eternity, one cannot affirm that God makes “all things new.” And if, in fact, God bears our judgment in Christ Jesus, then the judgment pronounced annihilates the one who pronounces it—not for three days in time, but eternally.

Conditionalism, the necessary corollary to “Annihilationism,” implies that there are things that exist in time, but not in eternity. Perhaps this is a discussion best left to philosophers and I don’t want to limit God’s Judgment with my judgment, but I fail to see how something could “exist in time” but not in “eternity.” As I noted above, evil does not “exist,” in the sense that the Good “exists.” Evil is the absence of the Good. Evil is a temporal absence in an eternal presence, non-existence annihilated by existence.