Presuppositions and Interpretations:
How Our Assumptions Affect Our Understanding of the Bible
Part 2 of 3

*This series of posts is a call to take a hard look at the filters through which we view the Bible. Our interpretations of Scripture can be colored by our own set of presuppositions without our even being aware of it. Therefore, it is critically important to step back and scrutinize our assumptions to make sure that they are true, so that the interpretations built upon them will also be true.*

As stated in Part 1, the doctrine of eternal condemnation has been accepted by the majority of Christians throughout church history as a fact taught in Scripture, but there is substantial reason to question whether that understanding is true. This series presents Scripture passages that suggest that God will *not* inflict eternal conscious punishment but will ultimately redeem all mankind. Yet when these passages are approached with a predetermined belief in eternal damnation, they are often interpreted in such a way as to support the traditional position and discount any universalist implications, as in the NIV Study Bible notes. Part 1 discussed a number of verses from the epistles. Here in Part 2, other verses from the epistles as well as John and Revelation are listed, along with their NIV study notes and my comments on the verses and notes:

1) Verse: But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself (John 12:32).

 NIV note: *all men.* Christ will draw people to himself without regard for nationality, ethnic affiliation or status.

 My comment: Subtly changes the sense from *all men* to *all kinds of men.*

2) Verse: For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! (Romans 5:15)

 NIV note: *the many.* The same as “all men” in v. 12 [“. . . sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned”]. *how much more.* A theme that runs through this section. God’s grace is infinitely greater for good than is Adam’s sin for evil.

 My comment: The notes acknowledge that the phrases “the many” and “all men” refer to all of humanity when it comes to sin and death, but not when it comes to grace and life. Yet at the same time, the notes say, “God’s grace is infinitely greater for good than is Adam’s sin for evil.” Is God’s grace able to conquer sin completely and redeem as many people as sin has destroyed, or isn’t it?

3) Verse: Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so
also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19).

 NIV note: *life for all men.* Does not mean that everyone eventually will be saved, but that salvation is available to all.

 My comment: The verses have parallelism. One trespass brought condemnation for all men; one act of righteousness brought life for all men. The disobedience of the one man causes many to be sinners; the obedience of the one man causes many to be made righteous. The extent of the *all* or the *many* in the second half of each verse is the same as the extent of the *all* or the *many* in the first half of each verse.

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

 NIV note: *all men.* Both groups under discussion (Jews and Gentiles). There has been a period of disobedience for each in order that God may have mercy on them all. Paul is in no way teaching universal salvation.

 My comment: Again the note assumes that Paul can’t possibly be teaching universal salvation, so therefore the verse must not mean what it seems to say, i.e., that God will have mercy on all.

5) Verse: For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).

 NIV note: *in Christ all will be made alive.* All who are “in Christ”—i.e., who are related to him by faith—will be made alive at the resurrection.

 My comment: The *all die* is universal, but the *all will be made alive* is not?

6) Verse: 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 confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9−11).

 NIV note: *bow . . . confess.* Cf. Isa 45:23. God’s design is that all people everywhere should worship and serve Jesus as Lord. Ultimately all will acknowledge him as Lord (see Ro 14:9), *whether willingly or not*. [Emphasis added]

 My comment: In 1 Corinthians, Paul declares that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (12:3), i.e., unless the Holy Spirit in him enables him to recognize Jesus as Lord. Compare to Romans 10:9—“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Here confessing Jesus as Lord is clearly genuine; it means agreeing to the truth that Jesus is Yahweh and that He is Lord of all. It is parallel and complementary to believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead. It is not simply a grudging assent or a forced submission. (If, as the note in Philippians claims, some are unwillingly acknowledging Him as Lord, then they are like the naughty little boy whose mother told him to sit in the corner, and he said, “I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside.”) Did God send His Son to die on the cross just so He could coerce everybody into bending the knee and saying the words “Jesus is Lord”? No! His purpose is that all be in genuine worship and submission to Him, that the words on their lips would match the love in their hearts for Him. The phrase *every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord* in Philippians 2:11 has the same structure and meaning as *confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord”* in Romans 10:9; this confession is willing and heartfelt, and God’s will is that ultimately *every tongue* will be doing it! As Revelation 5:13 says, “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them” will be praising the Lamb.

7) Verse: He will punish those who do not know God and do 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 majesty of his power (2 Thessalonians 1:8–9).

 NIV note: *destruction.* Not annihilation (see note on 1 Th. 5:3). Paul uses the word in 1 Co. 5:5, possibly of the destruction of the “flesh” (see NIV text note there) for the purpose of salvation. Since, however, salvation implies resurrection of the body, annihilation cannot
be in mind. The word means something like “complete ruin.” Here it means being shut out from Christ’s presence. This eternal separation is the penalty of sin and the essence of hell.

 My comment: This whole paragraph is about the just judgment of God (v. 5). The just penalty for those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel (v. 8) is “destruction” in the age to come (v. 9). But does this destruction mean that they will forever be excluded from the presence of God? The idea of being “shut out” from the presence of God is not in the Greek text; it was added by the NIV translators, who give the preposition  the meaning of “away from.” As Thomas Talbott points out, “In some contexts, [] no doubt does mean ‘away from’; in others, it means something like ‘coming from.’ In II Thessalonians 1:2, for example, we encounter the familiar formula: ‘Grace to you and peace from [] God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’ . . . God is *the source,* the one who *brings about* the grace and peace. And that, it seems to me, is the most natural interpretation of II Thessalonians 1:9 as well. The presence of the Lord in flaming fire, the glory of his power, is the *source* of, or that which brings about, the destruction of the wicked.” (*The Inescapable Love of God,* p. 94). So the NIV note correctly states that this “destruction” is not annihilation in the sense that the person who is wicked goes out of existence, but it misses the point that God’s glorious presence and the majesty of His power and the blazing fire serve to destroy the wickedness and purify the person. The verse referred to in the NIV note, 1 Corinthians 5:5 (“Hand this man [who sleeps with his father’s wife] over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord”), actually supports the idea that the “destruction” is of that which is sinful, with the ultimate purpose of saving the spirit. The destruction of the wicked does not mean that the wicked cease to exist but that they cease to be wicked.

8) Verse: 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).

 NIV note: *for the sins of the whole world.* Forgiveness through Christ’s atoning sacrifice is not limited to one particular group only; it has worldwide application (see Jn 1:29). It must, however, be received by faith (see Jn. 3:16). Thus this verse does not teach universalism (that all people ultimately will be saved), but that God is an impartial God.

 My comment: The verse is interpreted not according to its plain sense (“Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is for the sins of the whole world”), but according to the presupposition that universalism is not true (“Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is for the sins of people from every group in the world”). See also John 6:33, “The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” And John 17:2 says, “For you [God the Father] granted him [God the Son] authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.” Note the logic: Jesus will give eternal life to all those whom the Father has given Him. The Father gave him authority over all people. Ergo: Jesus will give eternal life to all people. [For a discussion of Calvinist and Arminian answers to the question of who the atonement is for, see “Pick Two (Who Got It Right: Calvinists or Arminians?)”]

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

 NIV notes: *heaven . . . earth . . . under the earth.* See note on v. 3. [Verse 3 says, “But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.” The NIV note says of the expression *heaven . . . earth . . . under the earth*, “A conventional phrase used to express the universality of the proclamation—no creature was worthy.”]

 My comment: The notes acknowledge that the phrase “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” expresses universality, referring to every created being. The praise that is offered to God and to the Lamb by every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth is not a grudging recognition of His power but heartfelt worship. (See also Revelation 15:4 below.)

10) Verse: Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed (Revelation 15:4).

 NIV note: Universal recognition of God is taught in both the OT (Ps 86:9; Isa 45:22–23; Mal 1:11) and the NT (Php 2:9–11).

 My comment: This verse and the ones cited in the NIV note teach not merely universal “recognition” of God but universal *worship* of God. This verse says “all nations will come and *worship* before you.” Psalm 86:9 says, “All the nations you have made will come and *worship* before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name.” Malachi 1:11 says, “‘My name will be great among the nations. . . . In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,’ says the Lord Almighty.” These “pure offerings” are not from unregenerate people who are being forced to acknowledge God. Daniel 7:14 confirms that all peoples will enter into true worship of the Lord: “He [the one like a son of man whom Daniel saw in his vision] was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language *worshiped* him.” Both Isaiah and Philippians say that “every knee will bow” and every tongue will proclaim the name of the Lord. According to Isaiah, God has made a solemn promise in His own Name that He will bring *all* people to humbly acknowledge Him as Lord: “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. *By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear*” (45:22–23). As noted above in the comment on Philippians 2, this confession is willing and heartfelt, and every creature will join in the chorus of praise to our God!

*Part 3 will examine still more verses that indicate that God has something better in mind than to abandon the majority of humanity to eternal conscious suffering.*

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