

heaven, but in paradise. Let us read the sentence with literal accuracy. . . . Verily, I say to you today, thou shalt [the day is coming in the future when you are going to] be with me in paradise.¹²

Renowned British evangelist John Blanchard has referred to placing the comma in Luke 23:43 *after* the word “today” as “a desperate bid” and “a novel form of punctuation.”¹³ Did Christ really have to tell the thief hanging on a cross next to him that he was speaking to him on that day? Jesus “could hardly have spoken them to him the previous day . . . or the following day. . . . The attempt to twist the meaning of Christ’s promise owes more to ingenuity than to integrity.”¹⁴

Moreover, the term *paradise* was not used by Jews exclusively as a reference to the earthly location spoken of in Genesis 1 and 2. It also was used by first-century rabbis for “the resting place for spirits of the righteous who had died.”¹⁵ In fact, two other New Testament passages use the Greek word for paradise (*paradeisos*) to describe heaven (2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), *paradeisos* refers to a heavenly place of blessedness “in the presence of God” (Ezek. 28:13; 31:8–9).¹⁶

The Truth That Hurts

Jesus described hell as “outer darkness” (Matt. 8:11–12) and a “furnace of fire” (Matt. 13:42, 50). He warned that it would provoke “weeping and gnashing of teeth” in those who rejected God and who would be condemned to dwell there forever (Luke 13:24–28). Christian scholars Gary Habermas and J. P. Mooreland provide a few thought-provoking descriptions of hell in their book *Immortality: The Other Side of Death*.

- “[Hell is] the end of a road away from God, love, and anything of real value.”
- “[It] is also a place of shame, sorrow, regret and anguish.”
- “[In hell] the pain suffered will be due to the shame and sorrow resulting from the punishment of final, ultimate, unending ban-

ishment from God, his kingdom, and the good life for which we were created in the first place.”

- “Hell’s occupants will deeply and tragically regret all they lost.”¹⁷

Well-known theologian R. C. Sproul admits that “there is no biblical concept more grim or terror-evoking than the idea of hell.” He goes on to state that “no matter how we analyze the concept of hell it often sounds to us as a place of cruel and unusual punishment.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, hell represents a side of God’s character that must not be discounted. God is loving but he is also just. His holiness demands that unrighteousness be punished. Human courts, as imperfect and tainted with inequity as they are, hand down punishments every day for crimes committed against the laws of the land. Should we expect any less from God, who is perfectly just and fair? According to Sproul, we can at least take comfort in knowing that God is not cruel.

It is impossible for God to be cruel. Cruelty involves inflicting punishment that is more severe or harsh than a crime. Cruelty in this sense is unjust. God is incapable of inflicting an unjust punishment. The judge of all the earth will surely do what is right. No innocent person will ever suffer at His hand.¹⁹

The reality of God’s justice can be seen in the teaching that there will actually be degrees of punishment in hell for unbelievers (Luke 12:45–48), just as there will be degrees of reward in heaven for believers (2 Cor. 5:10). Christ said that it would be more tolerable for some people in the day of judgment than for others (Matt. 11:21–24). Furthermore, Hebrews 10:26–31 plainly states that some people deserve more severe punishment than others.

Varying degrees of punishment in hell is not an improbable concept. A lustful thought during a moment of moral weakness is certainly not as offensive as actually committing adultery, although both are sinful. Similarly, the murderous deeds of Adolf Hitler cannot be compared to stealing a candy bar from the corner grocery store. Just as people hand out different degrees of temporal punishments—for example, breaking the speed limit usually results in a monetary fine, while murder may place a perpetrator in jail for many years—so God

will hand out various levels of eternal punishment. The Bible assures us that there will be perfect equity in hell.

Nevertheless, cults denounce the doctrine of eternal conscious torment of the wicked. Consider this response from the Jehovah's Witnesses: The "fiendish concepts associated with a hell of torment slander God and originate with the chief slanderer of God, the Devil."²⁰ In reality, however, the doctrine of conscious punishment comes from Scripture (Matt. 25:46; Rev. 14:11; 19:20; 20:11-15). It is not fiendish, nor does it slander God's character. Furthermore, Jesus talked more about hell than heaven. Nearly all of the Bible's teaching about hell "comes from the lips of Jesus."²¹

Redefining Hell

Since the earliest days of the Christian church, believers have preached that persons who die without Christ will continue to exist in a state of eternal conscious torment (2 Thess. 1:6-10; Heb. 10:26-27). As the Athanasian Creed states: "They that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire." William Crockett, systematic theologian at Alliance Seminary, makes a significant observation about the historicity of the church's long-standing views on hell:

When someone proposes to change a doctrine taught consistently since the inception of the church, it should make us wonder how everyone throughout the centuries could have been so terribly wrong. Not that an error could not have been made or that traditions are infallible. . . . The true test is how well the view conforms with the biblical data.²²

Although cultists strenuously object to the idea of eternal conscious punishment, they cannot ignore the fact that the term *hell* does indeed appear in God's Word. Therefore, they conveniently redefine "hell." Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, a group that does not fall within orthodox Christian boundaries, redefines it as the present state of earth.

[M]an lost his original value and became human trash. Hell is like God's human trash can. . . . Kingdom of Hell—Paradise Lost. . . . The master of this world, indeed, is not God, but Satan. . . . God is going to restore the Kingdom of hell to the Kingdom of Heaven.²³

But Scripture does not depict the earth as hell. Hell is specifically designated as the state of being that is encountered by unbelievers after death (Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; Luke 16:19-31). Hell is never described as part of this present life. Moreover, 2 Peter 2:4 mentions demons that are currently awaiting judgment in hell.

A word must be said at this point about the nature of hell itself. Is there real fire there, or is fire a symbol of something else? Is there real darkness there, or is darkness used symbolically? If such descriptions are read literally, textual problems arise. For example, God himself is called a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). God, of course, is not a giant flame. Obviously some biblical sayings are meant to be taken figuratively. We must, therefore, interpret descriptions of hell in ways that make sense and are biblically sound. Flames, for instance, are used in other biblical texts in reference to divine judgment (2 Thess. 1:7). Darkness is used figuratively to describe agonizing separation and isolation, as in the parable of Matthew 22:13, where a man is cast away from a brightly lit and joyful banquet.

From these passages, it is reasonable to conclude that the pain and sufferings of hell will probably be the emotional, spiritual, and mental misery that results from having full knowledge of Jesus' lordship after having rejected him (Rom. 14:11). Several well-respected Christian leaders and theologians (such as J. I. Packer and Billy Graham) embrace this position, which is known as the metaphorical view of hell.

The New Testament depicts hell as a state of conscious pain, comparable to that of burning, in which condemned persons realize (1) how repulsive and guilty in their Maker's eyes was the way they lived on earth; (2) how right was God's penal exclusion of them from his presence and joy; (3) how completely they have now lost all gladness and pleasure; and (4) how unchangeable is their condition.²⁴

Eternal torment in hell will also include having to endure God's wrath while separated from his love, his people, and all that is of value.

It will consist of "a total absence of the favor of God" as well as "an endless disturbance of life as a result of the complete domination of sin."²⁵ Unbelievers will feel unending pangs of guilt, despair, regret, bitterness, anger, sorrow, frustration, fear, hopelessness, hatred, and longing. Given the nature of hell, it is not surprising that the prophet Isaiah would declare: "How lovely on the mountains Are the feet of him who brings good news, Who announces peace And brings good news of happiness, Who announces salvation" (52:7).

The Annihilationists

Some cults do not reject or redefine hell. Instead, they simply limit the length of time hell will exist and teach that eventually all of the wicked who are placed there will be annihilated. The Lord will put them out of their misery, so to speak. They will cease to exist. A "merciful oblivion" supposedly awaits these unbelievers.²⁶ To David Berg, founder of The Family, even the devil and his angels would be annihilated.

I DON'T BELIEVE IN THIS ETERNAL TORTURE DOCTRINE . . . I think it would be more merciful if they were just annihilated. . . I DON'T KNOW WHETHER YOU COULD EVER REHABILITATE OR CONVERT SOME OF THOSE GUYS, like the Devil & the Antichrist . . . & some of the worst characters in history & the cruelest tyrants & whatnot . . . They can be thankful they're just going to be annihilated.²⁷

Unfortunately, increasing numbers of evangelicals are beginning to take a similar position.²⁸ Christian annihilationists, as well as their cultic counterparts, usually support their views by equating "death" with "annihilation" and "eternal life" with "living forever." The following explanation of annihilationism has been adopted by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDA), a Christian denomination:

God promises eternal life only to the righteous. The wages of sin is death, not eternal life in hell (Rom. 6:23). . . . When Christ spoke of "everlasting punishment" (Matt. 25:46) He did not mean everlasting

punishing. He meant that as the "eternal life" [the righteous will enjoy] will continue throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity; and the punishment [the wicked suffer] will also be eternal—not eternal duration of conscious suffering, however, but punishment that is complete and final. . . . This death will be eternal, from which there will not, and cannot, be any resurrection. The death the wicked die will be final and everlasting. . . . [T]he Bible makes it very clear that the punishment, not the punishing, is everlasting.²⁹

A majority of evangelical Christians strongly disagree with such arguments because they are not well supported either contextually or linguistically in Scripture. More than a few biblical passages indicate that it is the actual punishing of the wicked that lasts forever, not merely the punishment sentence. Revelation 14:11 describes the smoke of the torment of the wicked rising "forever and ever." This picture is painted again in Revelation 20:10, which speaks of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet being tormented "day and night forever and ever."

Annihilationists make yet another argument for a complete destruction of the wicked based on Matthew 10:28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." It is claimed that the Greek word used here for destroy (*apollumi*) literally means to put out of existence or annihilate. But *apollumi* can and should be taken another way:

We speak of the alcoholic who has destroyed his life. That does not mean he ceases to exist. It means that his alcoholism has deprived him of those things about life that are good and beautiful. This is the type of thing the destruction of judgment does to those who are condemned. It destroys from their existence everything that is good and beautiful. Nothing remains that is worthy of the word "life." Also, the particular word for "destroy" (*apollumi*) that the annihilationists appeal to is used sometimes with the meaning of "lose." Jesus warned us to "be afraid of the one who can destroy (*apolesai*) both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Here is a use of the word "destroy" in the context of punishment. But earlier in the same discourse this same Greek word is used with the meaning of "lose." Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 10:6, "Go rather to the lost (*apololota*) sheep of Israel." In the para-

bles of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, the word used for "lost" is this same word, *apollumi* (Luke 15:4, 6, 8, 9, 24, 32). These objects of affection were not annihilated—they were lost. We conclude that when the word "destroy" is used in connection with judgment, it takes meanings other than the cessation of existence. This is buttressed by the fact that the same authors who use the idea of destroy to describe judgment also describe judgment in ways that must be understood as meaning conscious suffering, as we have shown earlier.³⁰

Contemporary day-to-day living provides a number of illustrations that can be used to further explain the concept of destruction without annihilation. A 1987 *Christianity Today* article by Roger Nicole points out that we often speak of an automobile being completely destroyed, ruined, or "totaled," yet this is not to say that the car's materials no longer exist. The terms are used when the vehicle's parts "have been so damaged and twisted that the car has become completely unserviceable."³¹ In his *Systematic Theology*, Charles Hodge gives his own insightful illustration.

To destroy is to ruin. . . . A thing is ruined when it is rendered unfit for use; when it is in such a state that it can no longer answer the end for which it was designed. A ship at sea, dismasted, rudderless, with its sides battered in, is ruined, but not annihilated. It is a ship still. A man destroys himself when he ruins his health, squanders his property, debases his character, and renders himself unfit to act his part in life. A soul is utterly and forever destroyed when it is reprobated, alienated from God, rendered a fit companion only for the devil and his angels. This is a destruction a thousandfold more fearful than annihilation. The earnestness with which the doctrine of the unending punishment of the wicked is denounced by those who reject it, should convince them that its truth is the only rational solution of the fact that Christ and his Apostles did not condemn it.³²

The Bible also employs figures of speech to communicate the eternity of hell. It is described as a place where punishing fires are unquenchable (Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:43) and where "their worm will not die" (Isa. 66:24). Both expressions suggest a type of judgment that lasts forever. Additionally, Scripture draws parallels between everlasting life and everlasting torment (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:41, 46). These

passages seem to say in the strongest terms that the "final states of the just and unjust are exactly analogous—both are conscious continuous modes of living—except for their respective destinations. If heavenly bliss is endless, so is hellish agony."³³

The prospect of eventual annihilation, or the state of nonexistence, effectively cancels out the dread unbelievers should feel toward death. The following sentiments were expressed by Mark Twain in his autobiography:

Annihilation has no terrors for me, because I have already tried it before I was born—[for] a hundred million years—and I have suffered more in an hour, in this life, than I remember to have suffered in the whole hundred million years put together. There was a peace, a serenity, an absence of all sense of responsibility, an absence of worry, an absence of care, grief, perplexity; and the presence of a deep content and unbroken satisfaction in that hundred million years of holiday which I look back upon with a tender longing and with a grateful desire to resume, when the opportunity comes.³⁴

Standing against Twain's doomed hopes are the Bible and two thousand years of church history. Throughout the centuries millions of sinners have looked to Christ as their sole lifeline away from an eternity filled with anguish. Hell has provided considerable motivation for some people to look into the claims of Christianity. The importance of hell was impressed on me not too long ago when an atheist sincerely asked me an understandable question regarding my faith. "Richard," he said, "what are you being *saved* from?" I responded with as much honesty as possible: "Hell." I then proceeded to share with him the good news of Christ. As theologian J. I. Packer has observed, "When the badness of the bad news about Hell is unmuffled . . . the goodness of the good news about Christ and eternal life shines brighter."³⁵

The Second Chance Myth

Many cults that find eternal conscious punishment of the wicked too distasteful to accept still recognize the need for a hell. These

groups usually teach that there will be a second chance for salvation after death. According to Mormon apostle Bruce McConkie, the wicked and ungodly "will suffer the vengeance of eternal fire in hell until they finally obey Christ, repent of their sins, and gain forgiveness therefrom."³⁶ Mormonism is but one cult that teaches that people in hell will actually be taught the gospel and be allowed at that point to choose Jesus as their savior:

[T]he whole spirit world (including both paradise and hell) is a *spirit prison*. . . . In a more particular sense, however, the *spirit prison* is hell, that portion of the spirit world where the wicked dwell. . . . Before Christ bridged the gulf between paradise and hell—so that the righteous could mingle with the wicked and preach them the gospel—the wicked in hell were confined to locations which precluded them from contact with the righteous in paradise. . . . [Now] the righteous spirits in paradise have been commissioned to carry the message of salvation to the wicked spirits in hell. . . . Repentance opens the prison doors to the spirits in hell; it enables those bound with the chains of hell to free themselves from darkness, unbelief, ignorance, and sin. As rapidly as they can overcome these obstacles—gain light, believe truth, acquire intelligence, cast off sin, and break the chains of hell—they can leave the hell that imprisons them and dwell with the righteous in the peace of paradise.³⁷

Hebrews 9:27, however, states that it is appointed for us to die once, after which will come the judgment. There is no door left open for people to hear the gospel preached to them in some kind of spirit prison. Is this fair? Some say no. But it must be remembered that we are created beings with an extremely limited perspective, which is itself filtered through a multitude of sin-tainted thoughts and feelings. What seems "fair" to us may not line up with objective reality. God, on the other hand, is not encumbered by sin. He is holy and without limitation of insight. He is righteous and full of truth (Ps. 19:9). Consequently, we can rest assured that he will judge fairly (Ps. 96:12–13). Our job is to obediently preach the gospel: "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14).

Although the second-chance myth may be a comforting doctrine for people who cannot bear the thought of eternal torment for the wicked, it provides individuals with a spiritually fatal excuse for not coming to Christ: They can accept him later. Persons advocating salvation after death would do well to consider the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:2. His declaration serves as both a terrible warning and a blessed promise: "Now is the day of salvation."

A Universalist's Universe

Universalism, a thanatological theory similar to the second chance myth, dismisses eternal conscious punishment for the wicked as well as annihilationism. Its premise is fairly simple—eventual salvation for *everyone* "after a proper period of chastening for their sins."³⁸ The Unification Church declares: "God's will that all people be restored to Him is predestined absolutely, and He had elected all people to salvation."³⁹

Jesus taught a very different message. He said in Matthew 7:13 that "the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. . . . The way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (emphasis mine). Our Lord also declared that on the day of judgment many will be told to depart from his presence into *everlasting* torment (Matt. 7:23; 25:41–46). These scenes are even described for us prophetically through John's vision of the end of the ages (Revelation 14 and 20).

Universalists are notorious for taking Scriptures out of context in an effort to prove their presuppositions about the afterlife. For example, Romans 14:11 is cited as proof that everyone will eventually be saved: "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God." This verse, however, is merely stating that, at some point in the future, every person will bow in humble acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and give account of themselves to him (v. 12). It is a picture of the great judgment, where some will be told to enter into heaven, while others are instructed to depart into everlasting torment (Matt. 7:19–23; 25:31–46).

Like the second-chance myth, universalism attempts to do two things: (1) make more emotionally palatable the final destiny of

those who reject Christ in this life; and (2) make God fit human concepts of justice, holiness, and mercy. Influential countercult minister Dr. Walter Martin made the following observation in *Essential Christianity*:

Merely because universal reconciliationists cannot conceive of God punishing eternally the infinite sin of rejecting His Son, they have sought to draw from Scripture what neither scholarship nor common sense can possibly allow. Since they cannot conceive of God so punishing the unregenerate soul, they have set up their own standard of how God *must* act based on what *they* believe is justice.⁴⁰

Recent surveys measuring the religious beliefs of Americans show that universalism has great appeal and is increasing in popularity. A 1994 poll found that only 39 percent of U.S. citizens feel that "people who do not consciously accept Jesus Christ as their savior will be condemned to hell." It was also discovered that 46 percent of Americans—up from 40 percent in 1992—believe that all "good people," whether they accept Jesus as their Savior or not, will go to heaven.⁴¹

Another 1994 survey found that very few Americans ages fifteen to thirty-five could name even one of the Bible's Ten Commandments.⁴² Nevertheless, as far back as 1988, 76 percent of Americans believed that they had a good to excellent chance of getting into heaven.⁴³ Two years later, this percentage had risen to 78 percent!⁴⁴ In response to such statistics, Ajith Fernando—director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka—bluntly states: "Such is the confidence of this godless generation."⁴⁵

Our Promised Land

There is, of course, the bright side of the afterlife: heaven. As early as the first century, Christians were looking forward to a new home in the loving presence of God. In a letter dated A.D. 125, Aristides describes the new religion called Christianity: "If any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world, they rejoice, and offer thanks to God; and escort the body with songs of thanksgiving, as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby."⁴⁶

One of the most complete and complex descriptions of the eternal state for Christians is found in Revelation 21 and 22. Unfortunately, these highly symbolic chapters describing heaven ("the New Jerusalem") have produced some confusion. Many individuals either forget or neglect to distinguish the biblical imagery in Revelation from the reality such imagery represents. Some non-Christians have subsequently ended up rejecting God altogether because they look at the symbolism, fail to properly understand it, and discount the reality behind the imagery.

Christians, on the other hand, because they accept the Bible as true, end up with an entirely different interpretive misconception from failing to grasp the nature of symbolism: a thoroughly fictitious concept of heaven as a cubed city with pearly white gates, streets of shiny gold, and walls inlaid with precious gems. Theologian Donald Guthrie points out that these terms must not be taken literally.

The whole vision is clearly symbolic of a perfect state of existence. . . . [The city image] is better able to portray the corporate character of the redeemed community. . . . It is radiant as a rare jewel. . . . It is in the form of a cube, which represents its perfection. Even its foundation is bejeweled, while its streets are of gold (21:18–21). . . . The overall impression is that redeemed man in communion with God has a glorious future in store for him. The details may be presented in a symbolic way, but the truth is unmistakable.⁴⁷

Scripture also tells us that many things will *not* be in heaven, including death and mourning (Rev. 21:4a). There will be no more pain, for "the first things will have passed away" (v. 4b). Suffering from disease, broken relationships, unfulfilled dreams, and aged bodies will be no more. Famine will be eradicated and, with it, the pangs of hunger and thirst (7:16). Finally, all tears—"those arising from our own sin and failure, or from sorrow and bereavement, or those caused by others"⁴⁸—will be a thing of the past (21:4).

The spiritual domain that Christians envision as their future home is a place far more beautiful than the most exquisite place on earth and filled with joy unparalleled. In his *Heaven: Better by Far* (1993), eighty-nine-year-old stalwart of the faith J. Oswald Sanders listed what he considered to be some of heaven's most blessed benefits.