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

*Part 3 is the continuation and conclusion of this series that has been examining how our presuppositions can affect our interpretation of Scripture, specifically with regard to our understanding of issues surrounding doctrines of heaven and hell. The challenge is to make sure our interpretations are built on the solid foundation of the whole counsel of Scripture itself.*

Although the doctrine of eternal condemnation has been accepted by the majority of Christians as a fact taught in Scripture, there are many passages that suggest that God will *not* inflict everlasting conscious punishment. Yet when these passages are approached with a predetermined belief in eternal damnation, they are often interpreted in such a way as to discount any universalist implications, as in the NIV Study Bible notes. Parts 1 and 2 discussed a number of verses from the epistles, John, and Revelation. In another group of key passages that seem to teach the universal extent of God’s love and salvation, the NIV study notes almost acknowledge it or simply fail to comment on it:

1) Verse: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16−17).

 NIV notes: *world.* All people on earth—or perhaps all creation (see note on 1:9). [The note about *world* in 1:9 says, “Another common word in John’s writings, found 78 times in this Gospel and 24 times in his letters (only 47 times in all of Paul’s writings). It can mean the universe, the earth, the people on earth, most people, people opposed to God, or the human system opposed to God’s purposes. John emphasizes the word by repetition, and moves without explanation from one meaning to another.”]

 My comment: The note for John 3:16 says that in this case the word *world* means “all people on earth—or perhaps all creation.” In other words, it acknowledges that God loves “all people on earth—or perhaps all creation,” so much so that He gave His one and only Son for them. His purpose was that we could escape from perishing and have eternal life by believing in Him. Do we really want to put limitations on this great declaration of God’s love for humanity and His goal in sacrificing His Son?

2) Verse: . . . [W]e know that this man really is the Savior of the world (John 4:42).

 NIV note: *the Savior of the world.* In the NT the expression occurs only here and in 1 Jn 4:14. It points to the facts (1) that Jesus not only teaches but also saves, and (2) that his salvation extends to the world (see note on 3:16).

 My comment: This note says that Jesus’ salvation “extends to the world” and then sends us to John 3:16, where *world* is defined as “all people on earth—or perhaps all creation.” The implication is that Jesus’ salvation extends to all people on earth.

3) Verse: And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14).

 NIV note: None

 My comment: Which of their definitions of *world* would the writers say applies here? What do they think it means that the Lamb of God “takes away the sin of the world”? (John 1:29)

4) Verse: He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:21).

 NIV note: None

 My comment: Will God restore everything *except* the majority of humanity? Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament defines “restoration” this way: ς
: “the restoration not only of the true theocracy but also of that more perfect state of (even physical) things which existed before the fall.” If this definition is accurate, it would suggest that God will restore the universe to its pre-fall perfection, i.e., there will be no sin or rebellion or suffering, and all of creation will be in perfect harmony and fellowship with God.

5) Verse: [The ministry of reconciliation is the message] that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:9).

 NIV note: None

 My comment: “Reconcile” means to re-establish friendship, restore the favor of God. [For a fuller treatment of the meaning of reconciliation, see “Reconciliation: The Heart of God’s Grand Plan for the Universe.”]

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

 NIV note: *to bring . . . under one head.* . . . [I]n a world of confusion, where things do not “add up” or make sense, we look forward to the time when everything will be brought into meaningful relationship under the headship of Christ.

 My comment: What kind of “meaningful relationship” under Christ do the damned have? How does it “make sense” that God’s good pleasure is to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ, and yet the majority of humanity is left out?

# Conclusion

No single verse, no single passage, no single argument can seal the deal for either eternal condemnation or ultimate redemption. All of the verses cited in this series can be, and have been, interpreted to fit the traditional view. However, the goal is to take into account the whole counsel of Scripture and try to determine the understanding that is most in line with all that we know about God’s character, His purposes, and the condition of humankind. This blog shows how we may inadvertently interpret the Bible to match our presuppositions and issues a challenge to reassess our assumptions before building interpretations on them. I believe that if we re-examine the doctrine of eternal damnation, we will find it wanting. There *is* a valid biblical alternative: the doctrine of ultimate restoration—that God will redeem His entire creation. Both doctrines can be supported from Scripture, but they cannot both be true, so it comes down to the question of which beliefs we will hold as our non-negotiables and which verses need to be interpreted in subordination to the ones that teach those foundational truths. I submit that we need to consider the possibility that verses that seem to teach eternal damnation should be interpreted in light of the truth that God will redeem all people through the cross of Christ, rather than the other way around, as the NIV does. My fervent desire is that every believer would give the doctrine of ultimate redemption an honest hearing.

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**For further study:**

There are still other possible instances of reading one’s presuppositions into the text. Taken together with the examples cited above, they show a pattern of basing interpretations on unquestioned assumptions.

Verses: 47And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell (), 48where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” 49Everyone will be salted with fire. (Mark 9:47-49)

 NIV note: Verse 48—Isa 66:24 [quoted in verse 48] speaks of the punishment for rebellion against God. As the final word of Isaiah’s message, the passage became familiar as a picture of endless destruction. Verse 49—The saying may mean that everyone who enters hell will suffer its fire, or (if only loosely connected with the preceding) it may mean that every Christian in this life can expect to undergo the fire of suffering and purification.

 My comment: The NIV note for verse 48 connects this passage with eternal destruction. The note for verse 49 acknowledges that “salted with fire” may refer to purification, but if so, it must be talking about what Christians experience in this life. I ask, why can’t this “fire of suffering and purification” be in the afterlife? As Thomas Johnson says, “This description [Mark 9:48] was drawn from Isaiah 66:24, where it is applied to the dead bodies of those who have rebelled against the Lord. Is it a purifying fire, a destroying fire, or a fire of eternal conscious suffering? This passage does not give us the answer, though in context purification is suggested, since the next verse, Mark 9:49, says that ‘everyone will be salted with fire,’ a reference to salt’s purifying function.” H. Anderson notes, “We should not read into these sayings later speculations about the eternal punishment of the wicked in hell.”

2) Verse: And all mankind will see God’s salvation (Luke 3:6, quoted from Isaiah 40).

 NIV note: *all mankind.* God’s salvation was to be made known to both Jews and Gentiles—a major theme of Luke’s Gospel (see note on 2:31).

 My comment: Again the note waters down the force of the verse. The verse says that “all mankind will see God’s salvation,” but the note says that God’s salvation is “to be made known to both Jews and Gentiles.” The notes here and in Luke 2:31 (“Luke was careful to emphasize the truth that salvation was offered for the Gentiles as well as for Jews”) imply that the gospel is offered to both groups, but that only some from each group will actually experience God’s salvation. How much more powerful is the declaration that “all mankind will see God’s salvation”!

3) Verse: 16John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:16–17).

 NIV note: *and with fire.* Here fire is associated with judgment (v. 17). See also the fire of Pentecost (Ac 2:3) and the fire of testing (1 Co 3:13). *His winnowing fork.* See note on Ru 1:22. The chaff represents the unrepentant and the wheat the righteous. Many Jews thought that only pagans would be judged and punished when the Messiah came, but John declared that judgment would come to all who did not repent—including Jews.

 My comment: The notes on this passage and on Matthew 3:11–12 (parallel to Luke 3:16–17), Luke 12:49 (“I have come to bring fire on the earth”), Acts 2:3 (“tongues of fire”), and 1 Corinthians 3:13–15 (“[his work] will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work”) recognize that the image of “fire” is applied figuratively in different ways in the New Testament. The notes indicate that fire is associated mainly with judgment, and sometimes with testing or with the divine presence. They do not mention another important purpose of fire: purification. It is assumed that the burning up of the “chaff” in Luke 3:17 refers to the destruction and damnation of *people* (“The chaff represents the unrepentant”). The idea that the chaff could represent the worthless, godless parts of a person’s life, which are burned up in order to purify the person, is never even considered. Yet the context is about the baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire, which suggests a sanctification process. And 1 Corinthians 3:13, cited in the NIV note, is about a judgment of purification, not condemnation: A man’s work “will be shown for what it is. . . . It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; *he himself will be saved,* but only as one escaping through the flames.” Why does God put people through the fire? To judge, yes. But to torture them endlessly? No! Rather, to purify them, to burn up the chaff in their lives, so that they will be fit to spend eternity with Him.