

Several questions at tentpegsquestion@yahoo.com were about hell. Will the wicked suffer forever in torments of flame? Will they be there as long as we are in heaven? What about people who don't know about Jesus?

There were perhaps ten variations on this theme. I have been hesitant to answer these questions because I am in the middle of a major study on this myself. If you will offer me permission to "think aloud" on this difficult topic and be kind to offer me grace if I am wrong, I will go ahead and begin to answer. It may take several columns to deal with the issues involved.

Full disclosure: I believe there are elements of ego and wish fulfillment that hover around any theological discussion. I want to be upfront about my own issues here. I was raised in the far right of the Church of Christ. All people who didn't follow our system were, I was assured, bound for eternity in flames. A million million years in torment, they would be no closer to the end of their suffering than they were on the day they died. This hell-bound group included more than the obvious candidates (smokers, drinkers, dancers, atheists, card players, Hitler). It also consisted of any person who went to any other church than our particular branch of the CoC.

I didn't want that to be true. I agonized even as a young child about how God could burn people forever and yet say "God is love." I bring this up because, as I paw through this pile of books on my desk this cold, snowy morning, I want to be open and say that my desire to find an alternative view might be impacting me in subconscious ways.

I first found an alternative theory when I read Edward Fudge's book "The Fire That Consumes." To have a fellow CoC member -- an elder, no less -- tell me that our traditional teaching wasn't scriptural was a wonderful relief. His book is not an easy read because he is so careful, so studious, and so determined to footnote and backtrack

every point that you might need to back up and read something three times for it to sink in. It was -- and is -- well worth the effort required.

Then I came across a survey of Bible translations and texts by Gary Amirault. He wrote an article entitled "Hell is Leaving the Bible 'Forever'" where he tracks how scholarship is opening up the original teaching in Scripture. The KJV uses the word 54 total times while the New KJV only uses the word 32 times. The American Standard Version of 1901 (that was the favored version of my branch of the CoC) uses it a mere 13 times, all in the New Testament. The NIV uses it 14 times. Once you leave these more mainstream versions and get into literal translations we find that "hell" disappears. Even Greek-English parallel versions such as Zondervan's Parallel NT in Greek and English and The NASB-NIV Parallel in Greek and English do not have the word "hell" even once. The closer we get to the Greek and Hebrew, the fewer times the word "hell" shows up.

Not only is "hell" disappearing as we get more exact in our translations, the word "forever" is also changing radically and, in some instances, disappearing. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan (known as the prince of expositors) wrote "Let me say to Bible students that we must be very careful how to use the word 'eternity.' We have fallen into great error in our constant use of that word. There is NO word in the whole Book of God corresponding with our 'eternal', which as commonly used among us, means absolutely without end." ["God's Method With Men"]

We normally run to passages that say "forever", "eternal", or "without end" when we describe the torments of hell. Is that fair? Is that Biblical or is it merely traditional, perhaps based on the translation and interpretation work of long dead scholars who are beyond our ability to cross examine? Look at these examples of how God uses these same words and see if we aren't working from two different sets of dictionaries.

Sodom's fiery judgment is eternal (Jude 7) -- until -- God "will restore the fortunes of Sodom." (Ezekiel 16:53-55)

Ammon is to become a wasteland "forever" and "rise no more" (Zeph.2:9; Jeremiah 25:27) -- until -- the Lord will "restore the fortunes of the Ammonites." (Jer. 49:6)

An Ammonite or Moabite is forbidden to enter the Lord's congregation "forever" -- until -- the tenth generation (Deut.23:3).

Habbakuk tells us of mountains that were "everlasting" -- until -- they were shattered (Hab.3:6).

The Aaronic priesthood was to be an "everlasting" priesthood (Ex.40:15) -- until -- the Melchizedek priesthood superceded it (Heb.7:14-18).

Many translations tell us that God would dwell in Solomon's temple "forever" (1 Kings 8:13) -- until -- it was destroyed.

The Law of Moses was was an "everlasting covenant" (Lev.24:8) yet the New Testament tells us that the first was "done away" and "abolished" (2 Cor. 3:11,13) as God "made the first old." (Heb.8:13)

God's wrath rolled over Jonah "forever" -- until -- the Lord delivered him from the belly of the fish on the third day. NOTE: forever lasted three days. Hmmm.

A bondservant was to serve his master "forever" -- which meant until he ceased to "be", i.e. died. (Exodus 21:6)

There are literally dozens more of these examples. Our word "eternal" just isn't the right word to use in most of these places. There is also that problematical saying of Jesus in Luke 12:47,48. He says that those who know the Father's and refuse to obey will be beaten with many stripes but those who disobey out of ignorance will receive "few stripes." Punishment isn't a "one size fits all" affair.

In the last few years, when people ask me if hell is eternal, I have tended to reply "Yes, but those who are lost aren't." Whether they are destroyed or whether they are purified, I now believe that they do not inhabit a place of eternal torment forever... at least in the sense we usually mean when we say "eternal."

Does hell last forever? It seems so. Do those who enter hell stay there forever? Not if we use the same kind of language in the same way that the writers of Scripture used it. It seems clear that "forever" meant, as one commenter stated, "until God's purpose has been fulfilled." Certainly, scripture uses a much more elastic definition of "forever" and "eternal" than we use.

Then, some will counter, how long will we stay in heaven since God uses the same term for souls in glory as He does for souls in punishment? Again, referring back to a word in English to make your point is a reasoning error -- a common one and one I've made countless times, myself. If we understand "forever" to mean "until God's purpose has been fulfilled" then we have no problem here: we know that those in hell will be punished until God is done doing so and those in heaven will stay with God until He wants them elsewhere. I'm good with that. A God of love isn't going to kick us out as if we were guests who stayed too long.

And another thing...

There are twelve gates to the city, we are told. Do you believe in a literal gate? Do you think God imported pearls and gold into heaven? Was God being descriptive or was God using symbols that we could understand? When I read John's descriptions of all the precious gems and stones used in heaven's construction I do not think that God used atoms and molecules and geology to make our new home; I think he is trying to tell us that it is beautiful, awe inspiring, and you

should change your life so that you can get there. After we are there, God has every right to assign us some work to do, in or out of that city. We don't know what that work might be but, IF there is work for us to do, I am certain we will be thrilled to do it.

Interesting, isn't it, that some who saw "beyond the curtain" were told that they could not speak of what they saw? Paul said it wasn't lawful to speak of the things he saw. John the Revelator said he saw some things but was told not to write about them. Can we admit that there isn't a whole lot that we KNOW about the afterlife? We have some warnings and some wonderful promises. That is supposed to be enough to help us walk in faith. I am comfortable with the mystery.

But some still worry...

"If souls will not be in torment as long as we are in heaven, then what happens to them?" There are a few ideas here, all with some scriptural support. One view is that all will eventually be saved. Those who knew God and left Him might spend a lot longer in hell than those who didn't even hear the name of God during their lives, but after they are cleansed, they will be brought into heaven. This teaching is usually called "universalism" and there are many versions of it.

Like most theological ideas, they have scriptures that seem to back them up. Universalists remind us of the fact that God's promises that must be held up against His curses. For instance, God says to unrighteous nations "Depart from me into everlasting fire" (literally "age lasting"). But He also says that ALL nations will be blessed through Abraham and that all will be made right with the Lord (Genesis 12:3; Psalms 62:12; 67:4; 86:9; 145:21; Matthew 25:41,46).

Universalists say that all of God's punishments must be understood in light of His redeeming love, His will ("not willing that any should perish"), and his character. Even after punishing Israel again and again, He always came back to them and gave them another opportunity to walk with Him. (Genesis 12:3; Romans 4:13; Hebrews

6:17; James 2:13). Mercy triumphs over judgment. In Adam, all died, but in Christ, all shall be made alive but each in their own order (1 Corinthians 15:22 and Romans 5:18). The Lord, Universalists say, will not cast away anyone forever (Lamentations 3:31-32; Hebrews 13:8). He who taught us to love and forgive our enemies will surely do the same to His. All tongues will confess Jesus and all will rejoice in Him even though some might first need to be "seasoned with fire" (Matthew 5:17; Mark 9:42-49; Acts 3:21). Eventually, ALL mankind will praise God (Psalm 22:27-28; 64:4-9; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

While David prophesied that Israel's stumbling would be forever (Psalm 69:22), Paul said that it was not (Romans 11, especially verses 9-12). Paul says that Israel's fall meant the reconciliation of the world to God. He further says that Israel will be like one raised from the dead because the first (Israel) is still considered holy by God. His character ensures their salvation, even if it be through fire.

There are other views of the afterlife that don't include the salvation of every person but also deny that hell is an eternal torture pit into which the majority of humankind will be tossed to suffer for eons and eons without end. We call these views Conditional and Annihilationist. They, too, have scriptures that seem to plainly back up their beliefs.

One point both groups bring up is that punishment is not a "one size fits all" but, rather, varies according to God's will and the individual's circumstance. One example would be what happens in Luke 12. Luke 12:47ff is a strange passage. Jesus tells of how the Master will punish those who have done evil in his absence. Some were entirely, purposefully evil and they will be "cut off" from his presence. While older versions sometimes say "cut in pieces," the phrasing is the same as found in some Essenic documents in the Dead Sea Scrolls and understood to mean "cut away from our presence." The greatest punishment God can inflict is to excommunicate you. Since "every good and perfect gift cometh down from the Father," to be separated from the source of every single good, pleasant, kind, sweet, and peaceful thing is a horror too terrible to contemplate.

However, in Luke 12, Jesus says that some just disobeyed. They weren't evil, they just didn't do what they were supposed to do or they broke some rules. Some of those people knew that they broke the rules while others didn't. All will be punished, Jesus said, but those who disobeyed knowingly will be punished with many stripes while those who disobeyed out of ignorance will receive few stripes -- a much lighter punishment.

Jesus was -- all commentators agree -- speaking of the punishment given to the wicked at the end of the world. So how do we square this with the standard view of the afterlife that only gives us two options: total salvation and joy in heaven or total pain in the fires of hell? I posed this question to several lofty minds among my religious tribe as I was growing up and got answers as bizarre as "maybe the fire will be hotter for some than others... but it is still forever!" or "those who disobeyed knowingly will spend eternity realizing they didn't have to be there, so their additional stripes are psychological pain." Huh? If I am bound hand and foot, falling without end, in outer darkness, and on fire I doubt that thinking "Darn! I could've been baptized!" is going to make it hurt worse. But I could be wrong.

Dr. Fudge and other annihilationists made me step back and think again. When I go back and read all the arguments I used to use for making hell a place where people were conscious and in torment for eternity, it astounds me that I could have missed a very obvious point: when the Bible says "the smoke of their torment goes up forever" and "of their torment there is no end" there is no compelling reason to assume that that refers to individuals. Let me explain. Most of us have been told that the whole concept of Gehenna comes from a constantly smoldering, terrible garbage pit outside of Jerusalem. It was always on fire; it HAD to be to consume the garbage produced by the population of Jerusalem. The only problem is there is no history or literature to back up that idea. When Jesus referred to Gehenna he was most likely referring back to the days of Jeremiah where that prophet wrote of the coming judgment upon Israel. They were doomed, in part, because they allowed children to be sacrificed

to idols in Gehenna (and burning was probably a part of that ritual). That was the image used by Jesus and the apostles to describe the punishment of the wicked. So far, so good, but let's think a moment here. While the fire was eternal and while the smell and horror was eternal, each individual body was not. Jesus wasn't intimating that a tragically sacrificed body tossed into the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna) in the time of Jeremiah was still on fire and perishing hundreds of years later. The rebellion of Israel had continued, though, so Jesus warned them of Gehenna and reminded them of the judgment of God.

The burning goes on, but what is burned does not.

As Greg England, Edward Fudge, and Leroy Garrett have said, eternal life comes only from God. It is a gift only He can give. If He chooses to withhold that gift, you cease to exist. You are gone. This is often called the annihilationist position. How do the universalists deal with this? They hold a variety of positions, but the main one is that even the most evil will eventually turn -- after a time in hell -- and repent, confessing Christ (as in Philippians 2 where we are told every knee will bow and every tongue confess). Luke 12 indicates, however, that some are so rebellious as to be "cut off" from God; i.e. they will have their life taken from them. They will be erased.

Others believe that the evil or ignorant (of Jesus, the law, or a doctrine important to God) will first face punishment and will then be offered life with God if they repent. Those who refuse will be cut off forever. They will cease to exist. Others teach that not all of the evil or ignorant will go into hell even for a moment. Instead, they will merely be taken to witness what is happening to the devil and his angels and given the chance to repent or join the fallen.

But why is hell eternal if its denizens aren't? Because hell was created, the scripture says, for the devil and his angels. THEY are spiritual beings made of eternal stuff. They don't die.

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Let's review: The traditional viewpoint in my religious tribe is shared with much of the evangelical branch of Protestantism. Pick up a gruesome pamphlet from Chick Publications and you won't find too many differences between their view and ours: hell is a place where those who didn't accept Christ are tossed to burn forever in a pit. Sermons I remember from my childhood painted pictures of never ending pain, being tied up, thrown into a dark place where you would never stop falling, etc. It was lurid and, frankly, quite compelling! While I certainly wanted to follow Jesus I must confess that a large part of the reason I relentlessly sought out baptism as a boy of 8-11 (they relented and finally dunked me two months before my 12th birthday) was out of fear of hell. I knew I wasn't a very good boy and I knew those preachers were talking about me!

I had no reason to doubt this teaching and didn't until I began a word study of the words used for hell and for "eternal" or "forever." I was stunned and rather uncomfortable about what I found. When I shared some of my concerns, quietly, with a friend they suggested that I get a book called "The Fire That Consumes" by Edward Fudge, an elder in my own religious tribe. That excited me -- the idea that one of us had already written about this and survived to tell the tale! I got the book and read it along with many other books. Nothing I say here should be looked upon as being original with me and no conclusion I reach here should be considered as unique to me -- I am building on the foundation laid by many, many other Christian writers, some of whom wrote within a century or two of Christ and some of whom are writing today.

You can disagree with me and we can still be friends. I firmly believe this: it is very hard, if not impossible, to draw out the geography of hell and determine its nature and boundaries. All those chart sermons (drawn on bedsheets and whacked with a pointer!) that showed exactly where and how paradise and tartarus lay and what hades was... were building skyscrapers on cobwebs; there just isn't enough information in Scripture to become dogmatic about any particular view of hell. With that said, I find myself somewhere between an

annihilationist view and that of a hopeful universalist. Why? Let's start with the word "eternal."

The Greek word most often translated "eternal" is "aion." It appears about 400 times in scripture and its adjective form occurs about a hundred times. It is translated a variety of ways ("eternal", "everlasting", "Age enduring", "eon") but generally denotes a period of time -- great or small. In the Septuagint, "aion" is used for the Hebrew word "olam." When you start pulling out every instance of the use of "aion" you quickly find that it does NOT mean what we mean when we say "eternal." Here are some examples.

1. Jonah was in the belly of the fish "forever" ... and then he wasn't.
2. The Aaronic priesthood was everlasting... until it wasn't.
3. A Moabite was forbidden to enter the congregation "forever" until the 10th generation.
4. The Mosaic covenant was to last forever... until it was taken away.
5. God would dwell in Solomon's temple forever... and then He didn't.
6. Circumcision was a covenant forever... until it was done away with.
7. Animal sacrifice was an eternal ordinance... until Jesus took it away.
8. Several times, Israel is told that they will be punished forever... and then the punishment ends and they are returned home.

In the New Testament, it doesn't get any better. Shall we translate Matthew 24:3 "What will be the sign... of the end of eternity?" or Matthew 28:20 as "I am with you... to the end of eternity?" Similar problems come up if we insist on translating "aion" as eternity in these scriptures -- Luke 16:8; Luke 20:34,35; John 9:32; Acts 3:21; Romans 12:2 ("conformed to this eternity"???); Romans 16:25,26; 1 Cor. 3:18; 2 Cor.4:4; Ephesians 2:2; Ephesians 2:7; Philemon 15 and many, many more.

G. Campbell Morgan -- an incredible Bible student who no one could ever accuse of being liberal or not dedicated to the Word -- said this: "Let me say to Bible students that we must be very careful how we

use the word "eternity." We have fallen into great error in our constant use of that word. There is no word in the whole Book of God corresponding with our "eternal" which, as commonly used among us, means absolutely without end."

Many of you have "Word Studies in the New Testament" by Dr. Marvin Vincent. He says "Aion, transliterated aeon, is a period of longer or shorter duration, having a beginning and an end, and complete in itself. Aristotle said...'The period which includes the whole time of one's life is called the aeon of each one.' Hence, it often means the life of a man, as in Homer, where one's life...is said to leave him or to consume away. It is not, however, limited to human life. It signifies any period in the course of the millennium, the mythological period before the beginnings of history. The word has not a stationary and mechanical value...There is one aeon of a human life, another of the life of a nation, another of a crow's life, another of an oak's life. The length of aeon depends on the subject to which it is attached..."

This is where some will jump up and quote Matthew 25:46 where aion is used both of souls' time in heaven and in hell. "If we do not stay forever in hell," they say, "then we do not stay forever in heaven!" Remind them that God is in charge of how long "aion" is. Since He is a God of love who gave us His only Son, I'm not worried about how long He'll keep us around in heaven.

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I've had several people talk to me about how fearful they are that they are somehow still lost, not good enough for heaven. Though they believe in Jesus and live decent lives, they have read enough Christian literature to think that they just don't measure up, that they are disappointing God somehow. When they come to me with questions about hell I respond "Don't worry about hell. God doesn't want to send you there and I won't let you go there." I hasten to add

that I am not suggesting that I am their savior! No, I am telling them that life is “running to Jesus” and not “hell avoidance.”

"If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. If they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees. Let no one go there unwarned and unprayed for." (Charles Spurgeon)

Any discussion on hell that moves away from the traditional viewpoint brings cries of anguish out of fear that we will lose one of our greatest selling points: "You don't want to burn forever, do you?"

I wonder about us when we are so often focused on the gory and dark when the scripture offers us so much light and joy. God calls us into the kingdom. He doesn't ask us to scare others into it.

One commenter asked me to define what I meant by "traditional view" and that is a very fair question; especially since so many views out there are heralded as orthodox by this or that religious tribe. By "traditional view" I mean that lost souls will live forever and ever, conscious, in horrendous pain, tied up, falling, in the dark, alone. Augustine believed that, saying that "aionois" referred both to life and punishment in Matthew 25:46. Therefore, he stated, both reward and punishment must be of equal duration. That is also the first verse run to by those I've tried to talk to over the years. How can we be sure of forever in heaven, they ask, if the word "forever" doesn't mean "forever" in hell?

While I am not a Greek scholar (Hebrew and I are BFFs but Greek won't answer my calls), I know a lot about language. I was raised in several countries and have learned a variety of languages. I even got a BA in Linguistics before moving on to gain doctorates in other disciplines. I love language... and my eyes pop when people refer to the adjective form of "aion" as meaning "eternal." By the way, Young's Analytical Concordance never translates it that way. No literal translation of which I am aware translates it that way, either. Why? Because "aionois" is an adjective form, it is dependent upon the object it modifies. That is why Jonah was "forever" in the belly of

the whale and why it seems it takes the clerk at Wal-Mart "forever" to get a price check on the socks I want to buy.

Let's look at how language works. Here is a tall boy, a tall man, and a tall building. The word "tall" has a definite meaning but no objective, measurable reality. What "tall" means when I place it beside "boy" differs when I move it over by "building" or "man." It becomes even fuzzier when I use it metaphorically by speaking of a "tall order" or use the old Texas expression, "a tall drink of water." Still, none of us think "tall" is a confusing word. We know what it means. It means the same in every dictionary we own... but the absolute meaning of the word changes almost every time we use it. Its meaning is dependent upon the word or concept by which we place it.

A stroll through an exhaustive concordance will give you dozens of examples of the word "everlasting" or "eternal" (and their synonyms) being used to modify a large variety of things we know have beginnings and ends. Because of space considerations on a blog, let's just look at one. Habakkuk 3:6 reads this way: "He stood and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed. His ways are eternal." That's the NIV. In the KJV, the words are translated "everlasting mountains", "perpetual hills", and "his ways are everlasting." Does anyone think the ways of God have been here only as long as the mountains or that His ways will end when the mountains end? Of course not. The two words used there are widely regarded as synonyms. "Ad" was used for the mountains and it means "duration, perpetuity, eternity, everlasting, world without end." And "olam" is used for the ways of God. It is defined as "eternity, continuous, perpetual, without end." We get a sense of what Habakkuk meant by looking at the words modified -- mountains and God -- NOT by going by strict dictionary definition of the modifying words. [a NT example would be Romans 16:25,26]

If we go back to Matthew 25:46 we will also find another gem waiting for us. The word "punishment" here is "kolasis" which is always

remedial punishment, not capital punishment. [NOTE: when I say "always used" please understand that I mean "in every reference book I can find." If you have other information, I am always willing to learn] It is used of the pruning of trees, for example. When we take this passage and turn it into something out of a William Blake painting or Dante's Inferno, I think we err. Hell is horrible -- whatever it is -- and no one should want to go there. We should fight hard to keep people out. Still, we have to figure out if there is enough information in scripture to know what hell is... and I suggest that the picture we get isn't the picture I was told about in thunderous sermons by red faced men preachers in damp church buildings when I was a boy. "Kolasis" is for the good of the sufferer. It is not a sadistic, over the top, symphony of brutality. If -- as it seems -- "kolasis" is never used for the death penalty, then it brings to mind First Corinthians 3:15. I'm not sure what that verse means, but it definitely refers to some men being saved "but only as one escaping through the flames."

[For a thorough study of "kolasis" please get "The Inescapable Love of God" by Thomas Talbott, professor of philosophy at Willamette University in Oregon.]

William Barclay, when speaking of the definition we usually give to the word "eternal" and how we have placed that on "aionois" said, "The simplest way to put it is that aionois cannot be used properly of anyone but God. Eternal punishment is then literally that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give." We run off the road and into the weeds when we forget to notice what is "eternal" -- the punishment or the punished? The fire can be eternal but that doesn't mean a person stays in it for eternity. We have to be careful with our words (and, yes, that includes me).

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You might want to skip this bit: it was originally written in response to some questions about grammar and word usage. I think it's interesting but your mileage may vary.

I will address two points as quickly as I can. One asked if there were any examples of the adjective form of "aion" that indicate anything other than "eternal." The answer is -- yes, a lot. "Aionos" appears as early as Genesis 6:4 in describing "the mighty men which were of old." God's covenant with Noah is described as being "for perpetual (aionious) generations" in Genesis 9:12 and yet we know that covenant will end when this world ends. It is not, in other words, eternal. It has an ending. In that same chapter, verse 16 the rainbow is called the token of an everlasting (aionion) covenant between God and all flesh that is on the earth. Of course, the rainbow, earth, and all flesh will one day end, therefore the word cannot mean what we try to make it mean, i.e. "never ending, without an end even when time itself ends."

In Genesis 13:15, God gave the land to Abram and his seed "Forever" (aionos). The number of instances where various forms of this word are applied to things, situations, people, and times that will have an end point continues to the point where a printed out list I have gathered over the years runs to dozens of pages (to be fair, I use Arial in 14pt so younger eyes might kill fewer trees when printing). In Jeremiah 18:15, he uses several varieties of the word "aion" including aionious and aionion and applies them to things that are temporary -- pathways and scorn.

We can even find the plural of the word "aion" which, if we translated it the way we usually do, would have Daniel saying "to eternities and further" (Dan.12:3) which not only doesn't make sense, it sounds way too much like "to infinity and beyond" from Toy Story. Samuel was told to stay in the temple forever (aionos) and there are many adverbial instances of the word that cannot possibly mean "forever" as we understand that word. All of these Old Testament appearances of the word "aion" and its derivatives are the Septuagint's way of translating the Hebrew "olam" except four times. In the other 496 times, it uses a form of "aion." And any study of "olam" quickly finds that it is routinely used for things that last a relatively long time, but relative only to the thing described... not eternally.

The adjective form can be applied to God and, certainly, then mean "eternal" because of what it is modifying. However, it is used in a limited sense in (a partial list):

Genesis 9:12-16; 17:8,13,19

Numbers 25:13

Exodus 12:14,17; 27:21; 28:43; 29:28; 30:21; 31:16,17

Leviticus 6:18,22; 7:34,36; 10:15; 16:29-34 and many more

1 Chronicles 16:17

Isaiah 24:5

Ezekiel 16:60

Job 21:11; 22:15

... and a lot more but you get the point... All of these are adjectival forms of "aion."

In the New Testament, I believe that the noun appears 128 times and the adjective 71 times. The adjective form is translated "ever" (1x), "eternal" (42x), "world" (3x) and "everlasting" (25x) in the KJV, the translation that had a lot to do with ingraining the concept of an eternal torture pit into our orthodoxy. Forms of the word occur in all kinds of places, including Peter telling Jesus "you will never wash my feet!" It was and is a very variable word that can only be defined by what it is describing or modifying.

I have a good friend who is calls himself an "agnostic when it comes to hell." What he means by that is that the scripture just doesn't give enough information -- or consistent information -- to make definitive statements about what hell is, what it contains, how long individuals last in it, or even if it is more a metaphysical concept than a physical reality. I can't just wave off this man's statement because I know him: he is an incredible scholar of the Word, a man of integrity, and a very strong believer in our Lord. He doesn't follow conservative or liberal lines and he has never chased a fad in his life. He knows the

languages very well and, to speak plainly, I have never heard him teach a class without being impressed -- and learning something, too.

There are a lot of things we don't understand when it comes to God and scripture and it would do us a lot of good to all admit that to each other. I would go further and suggest that we become comfortable with mystery because I am not at all convinced we can understand everything we think we can. In scripture itself we see instances in which John the Revelator was not allowed to write what he saw at certain points in his vision or where Paul said that it wasn't lawful for him to describe what he saw in his. There are many, many hidden and unknowns if we are being honest with ourselves. The danger is in taking some of these, using our best logical processes to come up with an idea, and then going to war against any who disagree with us. An excellent primer in how this happens and the centuries of tragedy that results is Philip Jenkins' excellent book "Jesus Wars."

There are three words commonly translated "hell" in various versions of the Bible. The word "gehenna" appears twelve times, "hades" appears eleven times, and "tartarus" appears only once (which hasn't stopped ten thousand chart and powerpoint sermons purporting to locate and describe tartarus with pinpoint accuracy). Let's look at these words.

In Second Chronicles 28:2-4 Ahaz introduced Molech worship to God's people. Molech worship was particularly heinous. Some people dedicated their babies to Molech by quickly swinging them through the fire built in front of this idol but many more killed their babies by burning them alive. Most Molech totems were hollow. A fire was built inside so that the huge, outstretched hands of the idol would glow hot. The baby was placed on the hands and burned to death, its cries and smoke being an offering to Molech. There was worse but I'll spare you the details. God's prophets railed against those who "pass your sons and daughters through the fire" but Molech worship continued until Josiah put a stop to it (how effective his decrees were is a matter of controversy. He certainly slowed it down and moved it

out of the center of public life). The Valley of Hinnom was where Molech worship had been centered so Josiah turned it into a trash dumping site and declared it cursed forever. It was not, however, a trash pile that burned continually from his time through the time of Jesus; that was a medieval story that caught on (similar to the "rope around the ankle of the high priest" story) and worked its way into countless study Bibles and sermon illustrations. "Gehenna" became a synonym for judgment and a horrible place nobody wanted to end up in.

"Hades" is a very common word in Greek literature. It is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word "sheol," which some of us first encountered while studying the Psalms in the King James Version. The word means "unseen" or "hidden" and refers to the place where departed souls go -- since that place is hidden from our eyes. Both the best person and the worst person in world history go to Hades. The NIV calls it "death" or "the grave" which really doesn't do it justice, in my opinion. Hades is a very elastic term and is used by writers a century before and a century after the creation of the New Testament to mean anywhere those no longer with us might be... even if they might not "be" at all anymore.

And if Gehenna and Hades don't give us much information about the ultimate destination of the souls of unbelievers, "tartarus" is even less help. It appears only once, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Most commenters believe that this is just a parable, not a reporting of an actual event. If they are right, it has no power to inform us about what occurs to the lost other than that they won't like it. (Maybe that's enough?)

Perhaps it's just me, but it seems that a doctrine that held center stage in the medieval church and which has continued to color the evangelism, invitation songs, and secret fears of modern churches... there isn't that much in the Bible about hell. "Gehenna" doesn't appear in the Old Testament, the writings of John, Paul, Peter, Jude, the book of Acts or in Hebrews. Jesus only uses the word four times.

In fact, where he mentions it is interesting. In Matthew 5:21,22 we get the warning that calling your brother "Raca!" (another term that is brutally difficult to translate) is in danger of the fire of hell (Gehenna). What interests me... and I might be reading too much into this... is that he mentions this right beside a discussion of the limited nature of judgment and punishment inherent in the Mosaic Code.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was not, as frequently characterized by modern usage, a code of vengeance but a setting of the limits of vengeance and/or punishment. If a man struck you so as to put out your eye, you couldn't kill him or put out both of his eyes in return. You were limited to actual damages incurred (to use more modern legal parlance). Jesus wasn't talking about unlimited vengeance in any of the Sermon on the Mount. Disagreements and disputes were to be settled quickly and the disputants returned to worship together. When actual damages could not be paid, you were to find a way to settle with them (Matthew 5:25). Even if you failed to settle, you were thrown into prison until you paid every penny you owed... not "forever." Look through the Sermon and you find limited punishment in each instance... so why should we assume that his use of "gehenna" meant an eternal punishment by an eternally vengeful God who would not relent even after exacting pain from you for a billion billion years?

Look at Revelation 14:10ff. Some use this to teach an eternally angry God burning those who opposed Him forever but... wait... why is this supposed to make the saints patient? "This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints..." And how do we deal with passages such as Matthew 9:36 where Jesus sees those who do not know about him and has compassion -- not anger -- for them? And then Hebrews 13:8 where we are told that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever? If it is natural for God to have compassion, and if the punishment He ordered in our society and religion is always limited and open to settlement, and if the saints are to be patient while the evil are punished... we have to wonder about

any picture of him that has him dropping souls into an eternity of torture. It seems to contradict what we, in fact, know about Jesus.

However... if the eternity of hell refers to its existence and not to the existence of those within it, we have settled some of these seeming contradictions. If souls of those "who know not God and obey not His commandments" are either annihilated or, alternatively, refined by fire and then returned to God after being punished... that matches the rest of the gospel much, much more closely than does the standard, orthodox, Catholic view we inherited from those medieval saints (and sinners).

Some might want to run back to phrases such as "gnashing of teeth" and make that literal (while not making gold streets or gates of pearl literal). In response, read this from Dr. Thomas Allin, a historian, author, and Bible scholar of the early 20th century. "The whole Bible is Oriental. Every line breathes the spirit of the East, with its hyperboles and metaphors, and what to us seem utter exaggerations. If such language is to be taken literally, its whole meaning is lost. When the sacred writers want to describe the dusky redness of a lunar eclipse, they say the "moon is turned to blood." He who perverts Scripture is not the man who reduces this sacred poetry to its true meaning. Nay, that man perverts the Bible who hardens into dogmas the glowing metaphors of Eastern poetry..."

For example, am I really to hate my father or mother? And I really supposed to pluck out my eyes or cut off my hand if I have trouble sinning? Was Egypt really an iron furnace to the Jews (Deut.4:20; Jer. 11:4)? They how could they sigh for it and long for its missed enjoyments? (Numbers 11:38) You see, Eastern poetic speech cannot be turned in to Precise Modern English Legal Speech because it wasn't designed that way. A furnace that also had enjoyments? That made sense to the writer of the Pentateuch and Jeremiah. Maybe we should learn something from that. Yes, Jesus spoke of weeping and gnashing of teeth but even that was limited. God said that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the

morning." (Psalm 30:5) and "I will rest in hope for you will not leave my soul in Sheol." (Psalm 16:9,10)

I am still learning...but the more I learn, the more hope I have for all of us.

Some have asked me what kind of punishment might there be in hell. Most of us assume that the mentions of fire, being tied up, falling, gnashing of teeth, etc. are metaphorical or symbolic, not literal. I agree, if for no other reason than that the end of time and place also ends such mundane things such as gravity, teeth, and fire. So what is the punishment?

I really, really need to stress that what follows is entirely conjecture on my part. I have absolutely no Biblical backup on this. This is a thought exercise, not a proclamation of doctrine. Got it? Great!

Yesterday afternoon, I spent a lot of time child proofing our home. My grandson is coming up for a few days and we needed to put drawer locks on the kitchen cabinets. Why? Because children don't know what can hurt them; they are not born ready to face the dangers out there in the world. We spend a lot of time watching them, protecting them, and telling them things such as "the stove is hot" or "you could fall down the stairs and hurt yourself." Psychologists don't agree on what instincts, if any, are present in children at or shortly after their birth but many say that the only fears they have are falling, loud noises, and heat. Babies will shy away from a fire if it projects its heat (but not from hot surfaces if the heat is not obvious) and if you hold a baby and then suddenly lower it, its arms stick out in an instinctive move designed to break its fall. What is hell described as? The embodiment of our earliest, most basic fears: constriction, falling, darkness, and noise (weeping of the damned, etc.).

Quantum physics also helps us here. The whole science of black holes and the discussion of what happens when time stops (or slows to a crawl), and matter is suddenly broken apart into energy makes a lot of us Bible believers look at the descriptions of hell and see total

and sudden annihilation in a whole new light. I have come to believe that the lost are annihilated after a time of punishment; a time which varies according to their guilt and God's judgment (as Jesus put it: many stripes, fewer stripes).

Still... there is compelling evidence that after a period of punishment, souls can (will?) be redeemed. This is what I mean when I refer to myself as a hopeful universalist. I am not really there yet, but full disclosure and my respect for you demand that I mention the current trajectory of my studies. When I bring that up, people ask me what kind of punishment could be meted out on people that would then prepare them for an eternity with God. And here is where the conjecture part of the blog comes into full bloom. There is only one punishment I can imagine that would fit the bill (and I say this knowing that my imagination is a pitiful thing compared to the wisdom and creativity of God).

Think of this: God has had to witness every evil act... and its effect on other human beings, His children. He has spent an eternity inside the fear, the dry mouth, the terror, the helplessness of those attacked by rogue militias or evil government regimes. He has felt the brokenness of the woman whose husband has been unfaithful. He has entered into the heart and soul of the child whose mother is too drunk to feed him. You get the idea. Now...

...**what if** hell went like this: you are put into a place where you have to feel every hurt you gave to others. You have to see through their eyes, feel through their nerves, and have the full weight of the sins you committed roll through you until you had fully and completely felt ALL of them? You had no Jesus to take them away. You have to bear them... but not forever. Once you drank the full measure of this punishment (and it would take a lot longer for Hitler than it would be for your next door neighbor who is pleasant enough but not a Christian), then redemption could be possible by the grace of Jesus. THEN, every knee would bow. I'll give you scripture in a moment but, for now, I want to just do this thought experiment on the type of

punishment which might be waiting for those who die outside of Jesus.

Those who "without law" lived as if they were subject to the law, such as those described in Romans, would be spared a great deal of this. Once anyone felt it all, they would be so very grateful for the opportunity to be redeemed. They would be convinced of the just nature of their punishment. They would be formed into a being that understood evil and was so very ready to turn away from it forever. However, if hell is a literal fire and terror filled pit of pain... would someone be happy and ready for heaven after a good roasting? I have trouble imagining that. In contrast to that, if they were able to see with God's eyes and feel the pain they caused His children... if they could "know even as we are known"... then they would come into heaven prepared to bow to God because they finally "get it."

Like I said... just a thought.

Ready for knees to jerk? Here is where they usually kick in (pun intended but unnecessary).

"Isn't this just like purgatory?"

I smile when I hear this and am tempted to say "If it is... so what?" but I don't. I understand the fear. For almost the first half of my preaching career the easiest way to kill anything was to say that it looked like, sounded like, or may make people think we like the Baptists, Catholics, Methodists.... or anyone who wasn't in our particular corner of our particular religious tribe. "The [insert denominational name here] do it" was the death knell for many, many good ideas and plans.

That being said, I don't think what I am talking about is the same thing as the Catholic idea of purgatory, but I could be wrong; I am not an expert on their teachings on this subject.

While I remain an annihilationist, I have a lot of sympathy for what I (and others) call the "hopeful universalist" position. Here is why...

There is no question that God is able to destroy someone completely and reduce their atoms to nothingness. You can even find sudden, destructive acts of God that would seem to indicate that His patience with an individual or nation had run out (Korah, Nadab, Abihu). It must be stressed, however, that God's patience with people like this is always much greater than ours.

Even the words used for "destruction" rarely mean what we mean when we use them. The word "apollumi" is usually translated "destruction" or one of its synonyms but the fact is that every lexicon I can find says something like this: "The idea is not extinction but ruin; loss, not of being but of well being." Compare Deuteronomy 32:39 with Romans 8:38,39.

"See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life. I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand."

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Or how about First Corinthians 15:54 where death is said to have no victory?

Those who are lost (apollumi) are the reason Jesus came (Luke 19:10). Christ came for them and he has the keys to hell (Revelation 1:18).

If most people will be lost forever -- either in a burning pit or by being destroyed in that pit -- then certain questions spring to mind.

1. Was God unable to find what He lost? (Luke 15:4)
2. Was saving them too difficult for Him? (Jeremiah 32:17)

3. Are His keys only for locking people away and not for freeing them? (Revelation 1:18)
4. Is the devil stronger than God? (1 John 3:8; 4:4)
5. Is God able to reconcile all things? (Acts 3:21)
6. Is the cost Jesus paid only enough to cover some? (1 John 2:2)
7. See Ezekiel 36:23-38 and ask yourself this: if God can be so confident in saving a fallen Israel, changing their hearts, and bringing them into loving fellowship with Him, how can He then say the vast majority of Gentiles will not come to Him no matter what He does; even if His Son dies for them?
8. Is judgment final? What about 1st Samuel 2:6; 2 Samuel 14:14; Psalm 16:10; 22:29b; 30:2,3; 49:15; 86:13; 116:3-8; Isaiah 25:8; Lamentations 3:31,32; Hosea 13:13,14; Matthew 18:35?

No less than Martin Luther said this: *"God forbid that I should limit the time of acquiring faith to the present life. In the depth of the Divine mercy there may be opportunity to win it in the future."*

Jesus said that those who denied him would receive "greater condemnation" than those in Tyre and Sidon. How is that possible unless hell is a punishment measured out to match the crime (so to speak) rather than a one-size-fits-all pit? (Matthew 23:14; 11:20-24). In Luke 10:14, Jesus is quoted as saying that the punishment of those in Tyre and Sidon will be "more bearable" than the punishment that the people of Capernaum. More bearable? Interesting.

Some fear that we will lose fear -- as a tool, that is. If hell is not the medieval paintings of William Blake or the organizational chart of Dante, how can we scare people into the baptistry or into the church pew? My response is that fear is not our weapon of choice: love is.

Still, I believe that there IS a punishment waiting for those who "know not God and obey not His commandments." So I continue to reach them with the love of Jesus before it is too late to save them from that

horrific experience, even if that experience will, ultimately refine them. For, as God told Israel in Malachi 3:2,3:

"But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears? For He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness."

Like soap cleans a garment or like fire refines gold and silver, God will take those who are rebellious and turn them into those who bring offerings in righteousness. Gotta admit -- it makes you think.

Allow me to revisit a subject one more time: "if there are no words in Hebrew or Greek that correspond exactly to our word 'eternal,' how can we say heaven is eternal?" Or "How can we then say God is eternal?"

You can take everything the Bible says about heaven and once you strip out the figurative language about streets of gold and gates made out of pearl you have... not a lot. The whole "robe and harp on a cloud" thing is completely missing from the Bible and thank goodness for that. Who wants to stand around like that for eternity? Not me.

Again, I want to make this plain: I am not telling you what heaven is like. I AM willing to speculate about a few things but please remember it is pure speculation. I know I want to go to heaven. I know that Jesus will be there and that God will be in the middle of it (as far as we can use the word "middle" in a post-physics milieu). I know that those who have been redeemed will be there and that is about it. And that is enough. I want to be there! There seems to be quite a bit of activity going on in heaven with gates, eating and drinking, visiting, etc. How much of that is figurative and how much is actual is beyond me. It sounds great, though.

Some things in scripture make me go "hmmm" and they make me wonder a bit about heaven. Jesus says -- in a parable, mind you --

that the master will return and tell some servants "you have been faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many." It would probably be silly to take this and run with it and declare that we get to be actual rulers over something in heaven... there ARE those mentions of crowns. Sometimes we are said to throw them down in symbolic adoration of God but... we have crowns. I sometimes wonder if we will be placed in charge of some planet somewhere. I can't find a Bible reason for saying that... but I wonder.

Some teach that we become angels when we die but the Bible doesn't say that, either. In fact, it goes out of its way to say that won't happen. Instead, angels will serve us after our death. Okay... why will we need angels to serve us after we enter heaven? Where will we be going and what will we be doing?

And that brings us to the question: will we be in heaven forever? The answer is (drumroll please), I don't know. We have examples of beings who held high positions in heaven (ruling over many things?) who fell due to their pride (according to Isaiah and Ezekiel), their refusal to hold the positions they were given (Peter, Jude), or their antagonism towards the object of God's plan (Genesis). I'm not sure why we think that we couldn't turn against God while enjoying incredible gifts such as salvation, nearness to Jesus, and the community of the saints. Actually, I am sure why -- it is because of our English words "eternal" and "forever." I'd like to go on the record here and say I HOPE it is impossible to fall once we enter heaven, but I do wonder... does that mean that we lose all free will? Are we automatons? When asked that question before, I used to try to defend the traditional position by saying something like this: "In heaven, we will see, know, and understand so much that we will never be tempted to leave." Still... some left. Or were thrown out.

This whole line of discussion frightens some but I have to ask "why?" Just choose Jesus. I am not afraid of losing my salvation here on earth because I trust Jesus and I chose him. I am also not afraid of losing my salvation in heaven because I fully intend to continue

trusting Jesus and choosing him. If you ask me if it is possible for me to lose my salvation here I would have to say "yes." Still, it is not something that concerns me because I am just not going there. I have no fears about heaven, either.

At least twice, people saw something in heaven that they were not allowed to tell us about. John the Revelator saw something that the angel stopped him from writing about and Paul saw something that "it is not lawful" to speak about. Gotta wonder about that, don't you? If we are truly going to rule over a planet or a part of God's plan for another place and time, I can see why He would keep that from us. Pride is a poison and it killed Satan and a ton of humans. It has almost killed me more than once.

To me, discussions concerning heaven are fun and interesting but they do not unnerve me. Why? Because my faith is not dependent upon understanding the nature of everything about heaven... or hell. I believe in Jesus and, as much as I can, I chose him in every action and word each day. I fail each day, too, but his blood continually cleanses me of all sin as it cleanses you of your sins (if you believe and have been baptized). I am excited to see the surprise of heaven. When I get to open that present, I know God isn't going to be fobbing off a gift of socks on me. No, fully expect to be blown out of my socks by the plans He has for me and for you.

Can't wait.