

The Climax

Final judgement and eternal destiny

JUDGMENT ¹

Putting everything right

Following resurrection we encounter judgment.

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice, and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment (Jn 5:28-29).

Just as no one escapes death and every one is raised, so no one escapes judgment. God will judge the living and the dead (cf Acts 10:42; 1Pt 4:5). As we have seen before the biblical images are awesome; for example:

‘Once again, in a little while,
I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land;
and I will shake all the nations...’
(Hag 2:6)

‘I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke.
The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood’
(Joel 2:31)

‘Then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise,
and the elements will be dissolved with fire,
the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.’
(2Pet 3:10)

‘Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it;
from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.
And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne,
and the books were opened ...
and the dead were judged by what was written in the books
and by what they had done’
(Rev 20:11-12)

These, and many other powerfully disturbing biblical images, have led the majority of Christians to be very negative about the biblical idea and experience of judgment.

¹ As we explore this vital theme in our attempt to gain a Christian understanding of ultimate human destiny we recognise that the number and complexity of issues involved are huge, the range of possible biblical texts are vast, and that the different nuances of interpretation are many. It is impossible to represent them all fully, so we will have to be highly selective and representative, but we hope that we can do this fairly and sensitively while also being robust in our thinking and discussion.



However, while on one hand it is, 'a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb 10:31), in reality, 'judgment' is simply one of the most exciting ideas in the whole Bible!

As we have discussed earlier, the primary Hebrew word the writers use for judgment is *mishpat*; it means both 'judgment' and 'justice'². The core idea is 'putting everything right'. Judgment is the final point at which everything that is true and just and good is established in triumph, the place where all that is false and distorted and evil is destroyed. In a universe that is corrupted and perverted by evil and sin what could be more thrilling?

Judgment is an act of God's grace and mercy³. Imagine the present state of pain, suffering and wickedness in the world continuing without an end? God's judgment brings things right. It ends evil, injustice and rebellion. It is the terminal point for everything outside of harmony with God. The high-energy and graphic apocalyptic images we mentioned above proclaim one overwhelming truth; a day is coming when God will take the entire cosmos in both hands and shake the hell out of it! Every molecule within creation will be purged of evil by celestial fire. Every wickedness and perversion will be revealed and removed forever; nothing will escape.

We shall make some important final reflections on judgment at the end of this section, but before we do that we must consider the question about the destiny of those who have stood in rebellion against God, those who are sinners, those who are found guilty. What will be their fate? Historically there are *three* positions that Christians have taken:

- **Traditionalist:** those condemned will suffer conscious eternal torment in hell, excluded from the presence of God forever;
- **Annihilationist:** those condemned will be punished, but following that experience will be destroyed along with every form of sin and evil;
- **Universalist:** those condemned must confront their evil, find reconciliation by means of God's grace and be part of the total salvation of all things.

Let us explore these ideas together in more detail.

Eternal suffering

The traditional position is terrifyingly simple and clear; those who are found guilty on the day of judgment are cast out from the presence of God and must endure conscious unending suffering as a consequence. We have chosen three key scriptures to act as a basis for this understanding:

² The other word, used much less frequently, is *din*, which seems to have the sense of 'bringing an end to strife'. This would clearly have the same sense as 'putting everything right'. Both point clearly to the establishing of *shalom*.

³ God is the God of judgment (cf Mal 2:17; Dt 1:17). It is essentially part of divine character and activity (cf 1Pt 1:17; Rm 1:18). God is 'judge of all the earth'; taking rigorous action against evil and injustice (Gen 18:25). Scripture sees God acting in judgment throughout history on behalf of truth, as well as ultimately and conclusively at the *parousia*.



- From the teachings of Jesus: ⁴

'Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels ... and these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.' (Mt 25:41, 46)

- From the writings of Paul

' ... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and separation from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might'. (2Th 1:7-9)

- From the visions of Revelation:

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name'. (Rev 14:9-11)

In the light of these and other passages it is argued that biblical teaching on the consequences of judgment on sinners is clear. They face a fearful destiny of unending conscious punishment in the form of eternal suffering, the ceaseless conscious experience of torment and anguish. The most common word in English for this fate is 'Hell'.⁵ Taking the texts at face value the traditional and popular interpretation of the concept of 'Hell' has been expressed in the words of Augustine as:

'A literal fire,
people kept burning without being consumed,
in pain without dying,
by the miraculous power of God'.

For others who hold this view this crude language does not do justice to the unspeakable solemnity of the reality of 'Hell'. It is not a place but a dimension. It is a 'nothing realm', a terrible negative; it is eternal destruction, permanent inaccessibility to God, carrying into eternity the decision taken by a person in this life. The biblical language about this ultimate

⁴ We have not included the story of 'The Rich Man and Lazarus' (Lk 16:19-31) because it is a parable that uses popular Jewish imagery, it focuses on the state of the dead *before* the *parousia* not *after* final judgment, it is about resurrection from the dead, it has no place in a discussion about ultimate human destiny.

⁵ A popular and passionate argument for the traditional Christian position on the subject of 'Hell' is presented in David Pawson *'The Road to Hell'* Hodder 1992

separation from God is not intended as a description; instead the images like those of 'fire', 'darkness' and 'sulphur' are symbolic of a truth too terrible for words.

Many hold this view because they see no alternative in being true to scripture, and in doing so simply trust to the justice of God's judgment in the mystery of ultimate destiny, echoing the words:

'Shall not the judge of all the earth do right'
(Gen 18:25)

A few see no difficulties at all, and actually argue there is something essentially cathartic in terms of justice and the holiness of God in this being the final fate of the wicked. Augustinian/Calvinistic (Reformed) thinking argues that God has sovereignly predestined those who will be saved, and therefore implicitly or explicitly stating that everyone else will face everlasting damnation as a consequence of God's free divine choice.

There are others, however, who believe that a different understanding is needed to the whole concept of 'eternal punishment'.

Annihilation

The notion of conscious unending everlasting punishment, for *all* who are not saved, has been strongly challenged down through the centuries:

- It is argued that it leaves God as nothing more than a cosmic sadist⁶;
- It asks, "What do the scriptures actually say?"

Many Christians are convinced that the biblical text is clear that ultimately there will be those who reject God's grace and will be excluded from his ultimate gift of salvation, but their destiny should not be understood as 'eternal suffering' but rather punishment that concludes in total and eternal destruction. Those who hold this view are 'Annihilationists'.

They hold this view for the following reasons:

- **Language about 'Hell':** 'Hell' is the word in popular theology that has become associated with final eschatological judgment; however, when the word 'hell' actually appears in our English translations of the Bible it presents a real problem:
 - In the Hebrew scriptures it translates *sheol* the place where the dead, both good and bad, are to be found following death (cf Ps 16:10);
 - In the New Testament it can be used to translate the Greek *hades*, which is also 'the place of the dead', righteous or otherwise (cf Mt 16:18);

⁶ Traditionalists will argue that this conclusion is only arrived at because opponents to their view have reduced the mystery of God's holiness and justice to a human level of understanding, which the divine reality surpasses. This response however raises many questions about the nature of God's self-revelation and our being made in the image and likeness of God, which we are not able to deal with here.

- In the New Testament it is also used to translate the Hebrew *ge hinnom* (Gk: *gehenna*), literally ‘the valley of the sons of Hinnom’, on the west side of Jerusalem; the rubbish tip where everything foul was destroyed, including pagan idols during the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah (cf Mt 10:28).

So the word ‘hell’ has to be handled very carefully:

- On most occasions the word ‘hell’ is neutral, simply referring to ‘the place where the dead are’ (ie Heb: *sheol* and Gk: *hades*) – remember that in Hebrew understanding, ‘death is simply the weakest form of life’;
 - When it is translating *ge hinnom* it is referring to the total eschatological destruction of evil.
- **Language of finality:** Careful examination of the scriptures that speak about God’s final sentence upon those who oppose him reveal phrases like ‘outer-darkness’ (Mat 25:30), ‘eternal fire’ (Mat 25:41), ‘eternal punishment’ (Mat 25:46), ‘unquenchable fire’ (Mk 9:43), ‘eternal destruction’ (2Th 1:9), ‘eternal judgment’ (Heb 6:2). This catalogue of phrases emphasises the horrific quality and permanence of the punishment, rather than quantity and unending suffering. ‘Eternal punishment’ is an act of judgment the effects of which cannot be reversed. ‘Eternal (unquenchable) fire’ speaks of the nature of the fire and emphasises the impossibility of escape, rather than everlasting burning. It suggests the final destruction and annihilation of the individual consumed or enveloped by the unending flame or darkness, a full stop rather than an unfinished sentence.
 - **Immortality:** Historically the case for ‘conscious eternal suffering’ has rested strongly on the belief in the ‘immortality of the soul’. This is a Greek pagan idea adopted by later Christian thinkers into theology corrupting the clear biblical Hebrew understanding that we do not *have* a soul but we *are* a soul (Heb: *nephesh*). Only God is immortal (cf 1Tm 1:17), we will only live forever because we have been given the gift of eternal life. There is nothing intrinsic about a biblical understanding of being human that demands that people must live forever, either in ‘heaven’ or in ‘hell’. Much traditional thinking about eternal punishment is based on a flawed biblical anthropology. Some holding a traditional view have responded by arguing that full-embodied resurrection for unbelievers has as its purpose conscious eternal suffering following judgment.⁷
 - **Inescapable punishment:** Annihilationists are not suggesting that individuals somehow escape the full consequences of their just and deserved punishment.⁸ This is clearly not biblical. Neither is it argued that total annihilation alone would be punishment enough. The argument is that sinners will be raised to judgment. They will see the greatness of the glory to God. They will have no alternative but to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Christ. They will have their every action and secret motive exposed for what it was. They will see all that the salvation, which they rejected, could have made possible for them, all their potential in God now gone forever. They will face the full consuming wrath of God and experience the anguish of ‘wailing and gnashing of teeth’. Only then, once the sentence has been passed, and the full and just punishment of God

⁷ Universalists will argue that this is complete misunderstanding of the nature of resurrection.

⁸ Some annihilationist ideas in unorthodox Christian groups (like the Jehovah’s Witnesses) believe that sinners pass directly into oblivion at death and that only the just are raised, thus escaping judgment. This is not a view held by biblical-based Annihilationists.



has been carried out, will there be the final climax of the oblivion and annihilation of eternal destruction.

Conditionalism

A variation on Annihilationism is the idea of Conditional Immortality. This takes seriously the idea that immortality (eternal life) is not an attribute of human beings but the gift of God, given in response to faith. Conditionalists see evidence for this view throughout the Bible, but would point specifically to verses such as:

- ‘God alone is immortal’ (2 Tim 6:16)
- ‘And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and live forever’ (Gen 3:22)
- ‘To those who, by persistence in doing good, seek glory and honour and immortality (God) will give eternal life’ (Rom 2:7)
- ‘For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Rom 6:23)
- ‘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’ (Jn 3:16)
- ‘Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell’ (Mt 10:28)

Some Conditionalists envisage a conscious state for all between death and resurrection (possibly allowing for post-mortem salvation). Others see the idea of ‘disembodied souls’ as unlikely, and regard embodiment as essential to personhood (in which case a person’s destiny is sealed in this life).

Biblically, all will be raised – good and bad alike. For the lost, this will simply be a sealing of their destiny (or ‘end’) in the lake of fire, the ‘second death’ (Rev 20:14). Hell is then a means of destruction rather than a place of torment. Images such as ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’ signify regret because of what might have been, whereas images like ‘outer darkness’ signify exclusion. But neither of these is punishment in the sense of retribution. Rather, they are consequences of not attaining to immortality. Hell is simply a way of describing ‘coming to an end’ – a dreadful waste of potential.

In the words of the Church of England’s Doctrine Commission, “Hell is not eternal torment, but it is the final and irrevocable choosing of that which is opposed to God so completely and so absolutely that the only end is total non-being.”⁹

⁹ The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *‘The Mystery of Salvation’* London, Church House Publishing, 1995 p. 199



□ **Moral questions:** As we have mentioned above, these are primary issues:

- *“What is the purpose of eternal torment, what can unending suffering actually achieve? Pain with a clear purpose may be seen to be acceptable within certain clear constraints by many people, but pain without purpose can only be sadism and it certainly cannot be justice. Any other notion destroys the basic understanding of every revealed biblical value and the character of God as revealed in Jesus.*
- *“If Jesus’ death on the cross in a few hours dealt with the sin of the whole world, how can the unending suffering of an individual bear any relation to just deserts for their sin?” God clearly deals with sin qualitatively rather than quantitatively.*

The moral objections to the traditional view are overwhelming.

□ **The key scriptures:** Reading our three selected texts mentioned above, (as primary examples of all scriptures on this subject), should in the light of an Annihilationist understanding now have a different perspective:

‘Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire ... and these will go away into eternal punishment’ (Mt 25:41, 46)

‘ ... They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and separation from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might’. (2Th 1:7-9)

‘ ... he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night’. (Rev 14:9-11)

Here we are dealing with biblical imagery with a symbolic apocalyptic understanding, a not literal account of what exactly we are to expect. Sinners will be raised, judged, punished and then destroyed, along with all wickedness and evil. Sinners will be totally destroyed along with all evil. The complete destruction of evil and those who are evil is an essential act to enable the whole creation to be totally purged and become the new heaven and new earth.

There are, however, others who believe that the whole biblical expectation in terms of resurrection, judgment and human and cosmic destiny needs to be understood in an entirely different way.

Universalism

Universalists¹⁰ argue and believe that God’s grace, love and power will ultimately accomplish the full and complete salvation of all things in every dimension of creation.

¹⁰ The difficulty in using the term ‘universalist’ is that there are a number of forms of the idea of universalism:

- Non-Christian universalist beliefs;
- Pluralism, which see the Christian way as only one path among many moving towards universal salvation;
- Christian universalism that is only possible due of the victorious atonement of Jesus Christ.



Universalism¹¹ is of course a huge subject that touches a whole range of biblical and theological themes: love and justice, freedom and sovereignty, atonement and election, God's victory over evil and so very much more. As with the Traditional and Annihilationist views it comes down to how you read and interpret the Bible as a whole, and in terms of particular texts.

- **Shalom vision:** The most helpful point to begin a reflection of the case for universalism¹² is with the biblical vision of *shalom*¹³. Which sees the purpose of judgment as bringing into absolute reality the cosmic wholeness and integration of all things. For example:

‘Jesus, who must remain in heaven *until* the time of universal restoration
that God announced long ago through his holy prophets’
(Acts 3:21)¹⁴

- **God's love:** Every Christian sees the primary character of God as being love (cf 1Jn 4:8). For the Universalist this truth under-girds their understanding of judgement; passages in the Hebrew scriptures set the foundation for this:

‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end; ...
For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief,
he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he
does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone’
(Lam 3:22,31-33)

‘As I live, says the Lord God,
I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,
but that the wicked turn from their ways and live’
(Ezk33;11)

‘But God will not take away a life;
he will devise plans so as not to keep an outcast banished
forever from his presence’
(2Sam 14:14)

¹¹ While universalism has always been a minority view in the church it does have a long tradition going back to the earliest centuries. People like Origen (186 CE), Clement of Alexandria (190 CE), Jerome (346 CE), Titus, Bishop of Bostra (364 CE), Gregory of Nazianzus (373 CE) and Gregory of Nyssa (380 CE), to name a few, each held it. It has always been acceptable for Christians to believe that *maybe* everyone will be saved, but strong disagreement in many quarters towards those who firmly believe that everyone actually *will* be saved. That is the difference between the ‘hopeful’ Universalist and the ‘true’ Universalist!

¹² Christians who argue the case for universalism often do so from a range of different approaches, a book that argues for and against the subject from positions quite different from the one presented here is R Parry & C Partridge (Ed) **‘Universal Salvation? : The Current Debate’** Paternoster Press 2003.

¹³ This vision has been discussed in detail in many parts of the course, but is set out most clearly in the section ‘The Vision’, aspects of its essence will be summarized towards the end of this session. However it is important to recognize that not everyone holding to the vision of *shalom* may necessarily be a Universalist in terms of people's ultimate personal destiny.

¹⁴ See page xx for a more complete list of scriptures.

This love in its incarnation and atonement in the person of Jesus is total, it embraces not only the whole of humanity but also the complete cosmos in its salvation; Jesus does not just die for people but for the whole of creation:

‘God so loved *the world* ...
God sent his son that *the world* might be saved through him’
(Jn 3:16-17)

‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, *will draw all things* to myself’
(Jn 12:32)

‘...God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself’
(2Cor 5:19)

‘... through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself *all things* ...
making peace (shalom) by the blood of his cross’
(Col 1:20)

‘God desires *all people* to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth’
(1Tm 2:4)

‘We have a hope set on the living God, who is *the saviour of all people*,
especially those who believe’
(1Tm 4:10)

‘He is the expiation of our sins, and not ours only *but also for the sins of the whole world*’
(1Jn 2:2)

‘The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that *all* should come to repentance’
(2Pt 3:9)

There is also the image and language of the ‘two Adams’ in Paul’s writings:

‘... for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ ...
The first man, Adam, became a living being,
the last Adam became a life-giving spirit’
(1Cor 15:22,45; but see also v20-28; 42-49)

‘Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all,
so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all’
(Rm 5:18; but see also v12-21)

The impact of Jesus’ death and resurrection overturns completely the impact of Adam’s rebellion and sin; just as *all* have been affected by sin, in the same way *all* will be saved.¹⁵

¹⁵ The Augustinian (Calvinistic) view is that Jesus only died for the elect, known as ‘particular redemption’ or ‘limited atonement’. It is interesting that the Calvinist (Augustinian) theologian Daniel Strange says, “It is



- **Total salvation:** Building on the cosmic wholeness of the shalom vision and the inclusiveness of God's love and atonement in Jesus, Universalists believe that scripture is quite clear that the 'finished work of Christ' is the total reconciliation of 'all things'¹⁶. This phrase 'all things' means the totality of everything without any exceptions.

'... so that at the name of Jesus *every knee* should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and *every tongue* should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father'
(Phil 2:10)

The verb translated 'confess' is used in the LXX to imply not just confession but praise and thanksgiving. This passage clearly has links with Isaiah 45:22-23:

'Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth!
For I am God and there is no other. By myself I have sworn,
from my mouth has gone forth righteousness a word that shall not
return:
"To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear."

This is a response that cannot be forced, but is rather the free spontaneous confession from a heart of praise; these scriptures reinforce this understanding:

'... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord
and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved'
(Rm 10:9)

'... no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit'
(1Cor 12:3)

The theme of the complete cosmic reconciliation of all things continues: -

'For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all'
(Rm 11:32)

'(God) has made known to us the mystery of his will ...
set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'
(Eph 1:9-10)

'... for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible
... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things

indeed correct that *if* Christ died for everyone *then* everyone will be saved" (his italics). In the light of the scriptures quoted above Universalists would think little more needs to be said! See 'A Calvinist Response to Talbott's Universalism', in R Parry & C Partridge (Ed) '**Universal Salvation? : The Current Debate**' Paternoster Press 2003 page 160. However, Strange makes it very clear that he is in fact completely convinced by the doctrine of 'particular redemption' or 'limited atonement'!

¹⁶ In Greek this is the single word *panta*.

and in him all things hold together ... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven by making peace (shalom) through the blood of his cross'
(Col 1:16-20)

'When all things are subjected to him,
then the son himself will also be subjected
to the one who put all things in subjection under him,
so that God may be all in all'
(1Cor 15:28 but see also v20-27)

It is quite clear that the language of 'bending', 'bowing', 'confessing', 'swearing', and 'subjecting' is not coerced, but rather the free joyful, worshipful expression of the heart like that of Jesus the Son towards God the Father.

- **Sin and wrath:** All this sets the context within which a Universalist engages with the central issue of judgment. The Bible leaves no room for a 'soft' universalism that says, "God is love and he wouldn't punish anyone"; only a 'hard' universalism that recognises sin and evil as a terrible reality that must be dealt with in a way that meets all the demands of divine and human justice. There can be no place for soft options or subtle compromises; neither love nor justice can turn a blind-eye to any aspect of sin. Sin *must* be dealt with totally, completely and satisfactorily. The 'wrath of God' is a powerful biblical phrase that runs through both the testaments. It refers to God's just and righteous anger towards *all* sin and it is surely the response that all good people share; "Aren't you enraged about all the evil in the world?" The 'wrath of God' gives us confidence that ultimately all evil will be overthrown and totally destroyed.
- **Hebrew judgment:** In Western culture the word 'judgment' has the sense of a decision that is arrived at by a judge (or jury) and on the basis of this sentence is passed; it is the 'word' or 'decision' at the end of a trial. In Hebrew culture it has the sense of a 'process' by which the situation is put right and the matter resolved in harmony with the principles of *shalom*. Western adversarial justice systems have reduced 'judgment' to winners and losers, but in Exodus 18:23 we are surprised to hear about the result of judgment in the words:

"... all these people will go to their homes in peace (*shalom*)"

A biblical understanding of judgment and justice involves *everything* being put right to the full satisfaction of *every* party involved. This must also be true of eschatological judgment and justice also. Between God and every individual person, between every human relationship and every aspect of creation. Awesome!

While in biblical history the language and experience of judgment can be terrible, nevertheless, time and again the prophets speak of salvation hope for the people *beyond* judgment. For example, Hosea refused to divorce his wife despite her persistent adultery because he loved her, and he took her back even after she had publicly shamed him; in the same way Yahweh promises continuing love and to restore Israel, drawing her back to him, *beyond* judgment:

‘I will take you for my wife forever;
I will take you for my wife in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.
I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord’
(Hos 2:18-20)

These principles are important in informing a Christian understanding of eschatological judgment as it unfolds in the New Testament.

- **Jesus and judgment:** The subject of judgment and hell in the teaching of Jesus brings us back to our core text from ‘the sheep and the goats’ parable:

‘Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels ... and these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’ (Mt 25:41, 46)

- The word ‘eternal’ (Gk: *aiōnios*) refers to God, it expresses God’s eternal character and eternal purpose rather than referring to ‘an unending temporal experience’;
- The word ‘punishment’ (Gk: *kolasis*) originally referred to pruning trees to make them grow better and became the standard Greek word for ‘remedial punishment’ and is not used in any other way¹⁷.

So the idea of God’s punishment in Jesus’ teaching is clearly ‘restorative justice’. How could the God who calls us to, ‘Love your enemies ...’ (Mt 5:44), and whose son Jesus requires us to, ‘Be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful’ (Lk 6:36), demand retribution? It is not that the issue of punishment is not serious but that judgment is at the heart of the restoration of all things.

As Walter Wink has pointed out:

“Jesus ... understood judgment not as an end, but as a beginning. The penitential river of fire was not to consume but to purify, not to annihilate but to redeem. Divine judgment is intended not to destroy but to awaken people to the devastating truth about their lives. Jesus seizes the apocalyptic vision of impending doom and hurls it into time, into the present encounter with God’s unexpected and unaccountable forgiveness. Judgment is now no longer a crushing word on a failed life but the first word of a new creation”.¹⁸

- **Paul and judgment:** There is only one passage in all of Paul’s letters that might appear to challenge universalism and that again is one of our core texts:

‘ ... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction (and separation) from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might’. (2Th 1:7-9)

¹⁷ W Barclay ‘*A Spiritual Autobiography*’ pub Eerdmans Publishing Company 1977 page 66

¹⁸ Walter Wink ‘*Engaging the Powers*’ pub Fortress Press 1992 page 266



- It should read 'eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord'; the word 'separated' cannot be included for grammatical reasons;
- The word 'destruction' does not suggest or imply annihilation, compare 1 Corinthians 5 where the phrase, 'destruction of the flesh' (v5) is used to describe the redemption of the person:
 - The sin is heinous, 'of the kind not even found among the pagans' (v1);
 - The punishment sounds like retribution, 'let him ... be removed from among you' (v2) and, 'delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh' (v4), but in fact it is all about restitution.

This passage in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is about the process towards the fullness of all things in Christ.

- **Revelation and judgment:** Judgment, punishment, destruction and fire all carry a powerful double message: the total abolition of sin and evil from existence but also the purification and the restitution of humanity. This is the understanding that lies behind the disturbing apocalyptic images in the book of Revelation, including our core passage:

'And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name'. (Rev 14:9-11)

Fire is the symbol of both the annihilation of evil and the purification of people. We are told that we will be saved 'but only as through fire' (1Cor 3:15). Remember that the 'torment of fire' (Rev 14:10) and the 'lake of fire' (Rev 20:14) is the same as the 'lake of fire and glass' (Rev 15:2) that is before the throne of God.

Theses are not literal descriptions but deep and powerful spiritual themes.

There are other important images from Revelation that point to Universalism:

- The New Jerusalem has 'gates that never shut' (Rev 21:25), "Who would want to leave?" No one, they are ever open for those who wish to enter following the judgment that destroys evil and puts everything right;
- The 144,000 (Rev 7:1-8) the total completeness of the people of God; 12 tribes the 'completeness' of Israel. Twelve tribes x 12 = 144 the completeness of completeness. 144 thousand is the completeness of completeness beyond all imagining; total and utter completeness;
- The innumerable multi-cultural multitude (Rev 7:9-12) every tongue, tribe and nation that cannot be counted; clearly human totality;
- The 'Tree of Life' (Rev 22:2), its leaves for 'the healing of the nations', surely salvation and wholeness for all?

- The kings of the earth are a symbol of sin (Rev 6:15; 17:2; 18:3 – fornicating drunkards), punished by God (Rev 6:15 – hiding to escape). Nevertheless, they finally bring their glory into the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:24);
- Images like the ‘Book of Life’, the ‘Water of Life’ etc

All of this, and much more, powerfully point towards a clear implication of universalism.

□ **Two crucial points:** The discussion so far leads us to two essential demands:

- **Justice demands judgment:** As we have mentioned above, ‘A biblical understanding of judgment and justice involves everything being put right to the full satisfaction of every party involved’. The Day of Judgment must see those who have suffered injustice satisfied and those who have perpetrated injustice confronted with full restitution being made. Nothing whatever can be left unresolved. Judgment is deeply searching, and at the heart of the experience is the true significance of Jesus’ atonement and resurrection. Here we see the ‘process’ of judgment unfolding so that at the end each person can look God full in the face and know his forgiveness and know that all issues are resolved. There will be no un-screamed accusation, for it will be resolved. This will also be true for every human relationship. It may well be a process that involves ‘fire, darkness, wailing and gnashing of teeth’ – but this is not some form of ‘purgatory’ but rather an encounter of restitution and reconciliation in the most ultimate sense.
- **Love demands freedom:** For everyone to be saved there has to be an individual free choice of faith. For Augustinian (Calvinists) God’s grace is ‘irresistible’, but this denies the free choice of being made in the image and likeness of God. Biblical universalism understands the power of God’s love to be triumphant. God is the cosmic lover, the divine beloved, wooing to win every human heart, never ever giving up and seeing the creative power of the Spirit relentlessly overwhelming each person with love. There may be paths that lead through punishment and seeming destruction but always energised with love, mercy and compassion. The fact that faith is needed does not imply that some will not have faith. The belief that ultimately every person will freely choose to respond to God’s love, when still free to refuse, is the step of faith that prevents many from accepting universalism, but nothing is too hard for God (Gen 18:14), and is the only *total* view of victory and salvation that clearly God himself desires (2Pt 3:9).

Every knee will willingly bow, every tongue will freely confess, the work of God in Jesus will be seen to be totally and absolutely triumphant in ever possible sense.

If everybody and everything is not finally embraced by God’s *shalom* then Jesus’ work and God salvation is not completely and absolutely victorious. It will to some degree have failed. Any tyrant can sweep those who oppose them into oblivion, that proves nothing other than who possesses the greatest power. The universe can know no greater power than that which creates out of love, bestows freedom and in the face of unspeakable rebellion works to include the totality in perfect inter-relationship on the basis of absolute justice and righteousness



Reflection on judgment

As we commented above, the issues are many and complex, the implications are enormous, and the emotions attached to the different points of view are often raw and heated due to people's personal struggles and experience; plus the hostile responses that have become attached to them over the centuries of debate within the church and by outsiders on the edge challenging beliefs. But we have to decide and respond. We may be able to be agnostic about some of the detail but not about the broad direction of our belief.

Remember, that in exploring this subject we are dealing with texts, ideas and images that are largely drawn from hyperbole, parable and apocalyptic styles so they must be handled very carefully indeed.

So our final reflections would be:

- **Traditionalist:** It claims to have both history and hermeneutics on its side. It is the view that has been most widely held for most of Christian history and it argues that it takes the plain and obvious meaning of the text in its interpretation:
 - Modern biblical studies raises questions over reading parabolic sayings and apocalyptic passages in that way;
 - Carefully and honestly examined it presents major moral and spiritual problems that are never satisfactorily resolved and are usually just ignored;
 - It claims God's victory, either in that all those Jesus died for will be saved (limited atonement) or that God's overthrow of evil including evildoers is what is required;
 - It claims to provide major impetus for evangelism (and may appear to do so in some cases), but it has equally led to inertia to an extent that suggests people may pay lip-service to the view but they don't actually believe it or are so filled with self-satisfaction that they don't have any real concern for the lost.
- **Universalist:** Why is there often such a hostile reaction from Christians to the incredible vision of universalism?
 - It challenges the whole framework of traditional Christian thinking; it is painful and unsettling to have to rework deeply established patterns of understanding and believing;
 - It reminds me that I am the same as everyone else; the idea that I have a special deal with God, a 'limited edition' salvation, a unique spiritual insurance policy, evaporates. The very nature of the gospel is that we all stand the same before God;
 - It often sparks resentment when people have tried to live a godly life, turning their back on 'the pleasures of sin', "Why did I do that if everyone is going to be saved in the end? I could have had a good time and still be saved!" They can feel cheated, but it actually unmask the true intention of our hearts, "What kind of person do I really want to be?"
 - It also raises the question, "What's the point of evangelism?" Again our real motivation and understandings are revealed; salvation by works? Our passion should be to work for the overthrow of evil and to share the resurrection life of the age to come in people's lives ahead of time!

All this brings to mind several parables of Jesus’:

- ‘*Labourers in the Vineyard*’ (Mt 20:1-16) where the extravagant generosity of the farmer is an offence to the daylong workers. With the astonishing grace of God we all get more than we deserve and some get scandalously more! This is universalism! The understanding of the grace and victory of God in Jesus that it brings takes the Christian vision of hope into whole new dimensions;
- ‘*Searching shepherd*’ / ‘*Lost sheep*’ (Lk xx) here is God looking for the very last sheep when every other one of the substantial flock are quite safe; the love and compassion that will not say “No”;
- ‘*Waiting father*’ / ‘*Prodigal son*’ (Lk xx) here is God waiting for the child that has disgraced the family and wasted its fortune, but knows there will be a change of mind and a final return.

□ **Annihilationist:** This view stands between the other two views, which either suggests it is the correct one or a rather unsatisfactory compromise:

- It deals with the moral problems of conscious eternal suffering but still argues that scripture demands that some will be destroyed in God’s overthrow of sin and evil;
- It insists on human free will in choosing God, but does not believe that all will ultimately embrace salvation;
- It believes that Jesus died for every person, but probably not for the whole of creation; God’s love will be victorious even though some will refuse it;
- It tries to live with a generous yet cautious Arminian attitude.

We each have to decide. The challenge is to carefully consider the text, work with the big biblical themes, and have an open view of scripture, sensing which view gets closest to the consistent and yet totally unpredictable nature of a just and compassionate God.

‘I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted’
(Job 42:2 cf Ps 115:3)

‘... I am God, there is no other; I am God, there is no one like me ...
I have spoken I will bring it to pass; I have planned and I will do it’
(Isa 47:9-11)

‘For God has imprisoned all in disobedience *so that he may be merciful to all.*
O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways!
“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”
“Or who has given a gift to him to receive a gift in return?”
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever. Amen.’
(Rm 11:32-36).

LIVING IN *SHALOM*

New heaven and earth

Judgment, with its complete overthrow and total destruction of evil, creates the environment for the final consummation of all things. Now, amid the resonance of God's triumph of the ages, through the person of Jesus, the totality of the new heaven and earth comes into its fullness. Here are some of the promises and images that have called us forward to this moment of complete fulfillment:

'Of his all embracing kingdom and of his peace there shall be no end'
(Isa 9:7)

'They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea'
(Isa 11:9)

'For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating...'
(Isa 65:17-18 cf 66:22)

'... the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations;
and his dominion shall be from sea to sea ...'
(Zec 9:10)

'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'
(Mt 5:9)

'... at the *renewal* of all things'
(Mt 19:28)

'Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of *universal restoration*
that God announced long ago through his holy prophets'
(Acts 3:21)

'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage and decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God'
(Rm 8:21)

The peace of God, which surpasses understanding
(Phil 4:7)

'But in accordance with his promise,
we wait for new heavens and a new earth,
where righteousness is at home'
(2Pt 3:13)

'... for the Lamb at the centre of the throne shall be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'
(Rev 7:16-17)



Remember, we are *not* going to heaven! All those old dichotomies of thinking will be swept away in the total integration of all things. We will be part of the resurrection community at the centre of a Jesus-integrated environment that brings together the totality of everything physical and spiritual, everything human and divine, and everything heavenly and earthly.

The earth and the material cosmos we live today has found its completion in the recreation of resurrection of the new heaven and the new earth. Creation has shared in our struggle with sin and with us has discovered its liberty in Jesus:

‘The creation itself will be set free
from its bondage and decay
and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.’
(Rm 8:21)

All trees, plants, animals, birds, mountains and rivers, find their completeness, as are we ourselves do. The nature of our shared freedom is beyond either description or imagination!

‘I will make for you a covenant on that day
with the wild animals,
the birds of the air,
and the creeping things of the ground;
and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land;
and I will make you lie down in safety.
I will take you for my wife forever;
I will take you for my wife in righteousness and justice,
in steadfast love and in mercy.
I will take you for my wife in faithfulness;
and you shall know the Lord’
(Hos 2:18-20)

‘Until a Spirit from on high is poured out on us,
and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.
The justice will dwell in the wilderness,
and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
The effect of righteousness will be peace,
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.’
(Isa 32:15-17)

‘They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the centre of the throne shall be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’
(Rev 7:16-17)

Everything is so physical, tangible and tactile. So spiritual and ethical and moral; the sacred and the sensual inseparably intertwined! This is hope fulfilled; this truly is ‘shalom’!

The reality of this future has already been demonstrated in the person of Jesus. In his incarnation he perfectly and fully integrated the physical and the spiritual the human and the divine; the exact model of the new heaven and earth:

‘You will see heaven opened
and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’
(Jn 1:51)

In his resurrection he demonstrated not only the power to completely destroy evil but also the paradox of change and yet continuity before and after death:

‘What we will be has not yet been revealed.
What we do know is this :
when he is revealed, we will be like him,
for we will see him as he is.’
(1Jn 3:2)

God is all in all

The presence of God will be the overwhelming reality of the new heaven and earth (Rev 21:3). The reality to which all God’s purposes have been eternally moving. It will be the final fruit of God’s vindication and triumph.

The awareness of the presence of God will be the supreme feature to mark all being, “we shall see his face” (Rev 22:4) ‘we shall see him as he is’ (1Jn 3:2). The new creation will be the endless exploration of the unutterable beauty of all things that flow from the being of God himself; the eternal dance of worship.

It will be community together with all others and all things. We will experience undreamed of possibilities at the level of social relationships, that will be corporate and complete in the truest sense of the word.

There are no words to convey even a fraction of what the life of heaven will be like. We will attain our destiny; perfect relationship with God, with others and with nature. We will be perfectly free, fully glorify God, and reach the highest peaks of moral and spiritual grandeur. Time will be meaningless. Our present salvation will roll into the mists of eternity, and as it does it will gather to itself worlds, kingdoms and dimensions as yet unborn. There are no limits to the heights we are destined to tread in the ages ahead.

Having said all this we still miss the central significance of everything. That is the meaning that everything has for God himself. God’s joy will be much greater than ours. It will be the fulfillment of his heart. We will be united with him. He will be vindicated fully. He will be ‘all in all’. We shall worship him, and he will rejoice in us.

We can sense just something of what the wonder of this eternal life will be, when we begin to realise; in the face of all the unspeakable pain, evil and anguish throughout history, the primary argument against believing in a God who is good, everything God has done will be acclaimed as perfect and his eternal plan as flawless. To think like this appears incomprehensible to us at this moment, but in that day it will be so. That is something of what is meant by the words about Jesus: -

‘... for the joy that was set before him endured the cross,
scorning its shame,
and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God’
(Heb 12:2)

Inspiration

Proclaiming this message of ultimate *shalom*, while exemplifying it in the present in compassion, justice and integrity in the power of the risen Jesus is the gospel. This profound certainty of hope is the energy of evangelism; this is the truth that is to impact people’s lives ahead of time. This is our inspiration. We ‘hasten the day of the Lord’ (2Pt 3:12):

‘It is he whom we proclaim,
warning *everyone* and teaching *everyone* in all wisdom,
so that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ.
For this I toil and struggle
With all the energy he powerfully inspires within me.’
(Col1:28-29)

Questions and Reflections

1. How should Christian hope of ‘the end’ influence and inspire us?
2. Why is ‘judgment’ at the heart of Christian hope?
3. Christians persist in saying that they are going to go to ‘heaven’ when they die. Why do you think they say this? What do you think they understand by this idea? What problems does it present? How do we encourage people to see that their destiny is in fact ‘the new heaven and new earth’? Why is this idea so important to understand?

Reading and Resources

Key books:

R Bauckham & T Hart ‘*Hope Against Hope*’ Darton, Longman & Todd 1999

JB Green (Ed et al) ‘*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*’ IVP 1992: article: ‘Kingdom of God’ / Heaven by CC Caragounis p 417-430

G MacDonald ‘*The Evangelical Universalist*’ SPCK 2008

NT Wright ‘*New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of the Christian Hope*’
Grove Books 1999

NT Wright ‘*The Resurrection of the Son of God*’ SPCK 2003

P Yoder ‘*Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace*’ Life & Faith Press
1987

Other useful book resources:

J Alison ‘*Living in the End Times*’ SPCK 1997



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D Thompson '**The End of Time**' Minerva 1997
Walter Wink '**Engaging the Powers**' Fortress Press 1992
NT Wright '**The New Testament and the People of God**' SPCK 1992
NT Wright '**Jesus and the Victory of God**' SPCK 1996
NT Wright '**Surprised by Hope**' SPCK 2007
PB Yoder & WM Swartley (Ed) '**The Meaning of Peace**' (2nd Ed) IMS Elkhart 2001