

The Bad Place
Or,
Everything You Always
Wanted to Know about Hell...
But were Afraid to Ask.

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The Bad Place
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By J. Webb Mealy
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- ⁸ Your hand will find out all your enemies;
your right hand will find out those who hate you.
- ⁹ You will make them like a fiery furnace
when you appear.
- The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath,
and fire will consume them.
- ¹⁰ You will destroy their offspring from the earth,
and their children from among humankind.
- ¹¹ If they plan evil against you,
if they devise mischief, they will not succeed.

(Ps. 21:8-11)

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Introduction: What This Book Is and How to Read It

Don't be afraid of people who kill the body, but can't kill the soul. Be more afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna. (Mt. 10:28)

Who This Book is For

This book is for Christians who love God and love the Bible, and who want to understand exactly what the Bible teaches about the ultimate fate of the unrepentant. It's also for non-Christians and former Christians who feel that they could never believe in Jesus, if that means that they have to believe in an everlasting hell.

Does something seem *wrong* about the idea that God's eternal plan is to torment the majority of his creatures forever? That's because there *is* something wrong with it—something deeply wrong. No matter how “traditional” or commonly believed it is, the idea of unending torment simply cannot be reconciled with the loving and just character of God that has been revealed to us by Jesus and his apostles. Does that leave us with a Bible and a Christian faith with a huge contradiction in it? No it doesn't. It leaves us with a challenge: to look deeply and fearlessly at the passages that supposedly encourage this idea, and see for ourselves what they say. When we have looked squarely at all the biblical evidence, we can then decide whether we think that we're forced, if we believe in the Bible as the definitive revelation of God's will, to believe in everlasting torment.

Where We're Going in This Book

In this book we are going to look carefully at everything that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament have to say about the ultimate fate of the unrepentant. We are going to proceed step by step, so that by the end the matter will be clear, and there will be no unpleasant surprises. This is no trifling matter, to say the least. For that reason, we're going to be thorough and unflinching in our study. Nothing is going to be swept under the carpet. If you read this book with care and patience, you will have a solid biblical answer for yourself and for everyone you talk to who believes that the Bible predicts everlasting fiery torment for the lost.

How I Came to Write This Book

I am a Christian, a believer in and follower of Jesus Christ. God's grace enabled me to come to a personal and life-changing faith in Jesus as a young man of 18. Since that moment, I have always loved reading the Bible, and have read it cover to cover

many, many times. I have always been struck by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Bible passages do not threaten the unrepentant with unending torment, but rather with the devastating tragedy of being refused entry to eternal life. I have found myself meditating on this fact, and wondering how to make sense of the handful of disturbing passages that seem to picture a fate of everlasting torment.

I had a breakthrough insight in my senior year of college, while I was writing a paper about the millennium in the book of Revelation. As I pondered John's words, I suddenly realized (1) that the book of Revelation contains the one and only Bible passage that explicitly speaks of unending torment for unrepentant human beings (see Rev. 14:9-11), and (2) that Revelation itself also puts forward an entirely different vision of the ultimate fate of the unrepentant. The last great rebellion of Rev. 20:7-10, paralleled by Isa. 26:10–27:5 and Heb. 10:27, pictures the resurrection, judgment, and annihilation of the unrepentant. I meditated for many years on Revelation's double picture of the end, and I ultimately presented my insights systematically in *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*.¹ That book currently stands as the single most thorough and detailed explanation of Revelation 20 ever published. Supplementing this study, I have recently published *The End of the Unrepentant: A Study of the Biblical Themes of Fire and Being Consumed*.² That book covers similar ground to the one you are now reading, except that it looks closely at every relevant passage in the *Old Testament*, as well as the New Testament. It is about 300 pages long, and I wanted to write a shorter version for people who don't have the time to trudge through so much material. If you want the long version, you can read *The End of the Unrepentant*; if you want the short version, this is it.

I held the intention for many years to write on this topic, and I finally decided it was time to do it in 2011. I made up my mind to begin writing after the publication of Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*.³ In it, he dared to say that a Christian would be in good company among the honored theologians of the Christian faith if they felt uneasy about the idea that God will torment people forever.⁴ In return for his honesty, Bell was subjected to a firestorm of criticism by evangelicals. He was the object of what can only be called a massive religious rage, and was branded as a dangerous heretic and false teacher. A number of people even went so far as to say that because Rob Bell doesn't teach the everlasting nature of hell, he is *leading* people to hell, and he must be *going* to hell. Bell is trained as a pastor and preacher/teacher, not as a technical Bible scholar. Nonetheless, his instincts are

¹ JSNT Supplement Series, 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992. This was the published version of my PhD thesis of the same title, for which I received a doctorate in Biblical Studies from the University of Sheffield, England.

² Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013.

³ New York: HarperOne, 2011.

⁴ *Love Wins*, pp. 107ff.

sound on this subject. I am a Bible scholar. What Rob Bell put forward in *Love Wins* as an honest and humble opinion, I am going to demonstrate from the ground up, by means of a thorough study of the Bible.

What You Will Find in This Book

Chapter 1 gives you a sampling of four of the most famous passages that most people think of first when they think of “hell.” It shows that these passages don’t have anything whatever to do with eternal torment.

Chapter 2 gives you a tour of Bible passages that look ahead to a great transition from the current age to an age of renewal, in which God’s kingdom is fully manifested throughout the world.

Chapter 3 introduces you to the teachings of Jesus and the NT epistles on the relationship between this “changing of the ages,” on the one hand, and the ideas of resurrection and judgment, on the other hand.

Chapter 4 supplements what you learned about resurrection, judgment, and the changing of the ages in Chapter 3 by taking an in-depth look at Isaiah 24–27 and Revelation 19–20.

Chapter 5 takes you through all the significant passages in the NT Gospels and Epistles that have been claimed to teach everlasting torment. By applying the knowledge gained in Chapters 2–4, we will be able to make clear and satisfying sense of these passages. We will find that none of them teaches that God plans to torment the unrepentant forever.

Chapter 6 presents a detailed discussion of Rev. 14:9-12 and 20:10, the only two passages in the entire Bible that actually picture everlasting torment. Only one of these, Rev. 14:9-12, appears to be capable of application to ordinary human beings, since Rev. 20:10 specifically concerns Satan and the beast and false prophet. By looking both at closely related passages in the Book of Revelation itself and at key background passages in OT prophecy such as Isa. 34:8-10, you’ll have the information to decide for yourself whether these passages are to be taken literally in terms of their pictures of unending torment.

The Conclusion addresses the important theological issues that lie behind the dispute over everlasting torment. It also tackles the question of whether both the motivation of non-Christians to convert and the Christian motivation to do evangelism will suffer without a doctrine of everlasting torment.

About the Scripture Versions Used

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Office by Biblica, Inc.TM For quotations of the New Testament, I have used *The Spoken English New Testament: A New Translation from the Greek by J. Webb Mealy* (Preliminary Edition (revised); Oakland, CA: SENT Press, 2016 [2008]). This is my own scholarly translation of the New Testament from the original Koine Greek. Its renderings are designed to be extremely close to the Greek, while at the same time making the text as natural sounding and accessible as possible to non-Christians and new Christians. You can read it or purchase a copy online at www.sentpress.com.

How to Use the Strong's Numbers in the Footnotes

This book is designed to be accessible to people who are not experts in biblical languages. When I occasionally need to talk about a Greek or Hebrew word in the Bible, I give the Strong's number for that word. At the back of *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (available online and from various publishers), you will find basic Greek and Hebrew dictionaries. Each word in the dictionaries is given a unique number. Using these numbers, you can do powerful word study on Greek and Hebrew words. If you have access to the worldwide web, all you have to do is go online to blueletterbible.org. Find the search box named LexiConc (short for Lexicon-Concordance), and plug in the number, including the H or G prefix. Up will come a dictionary entry, and every verse in the Old or New Testament that contains that word! Each verse listed will indicate the English word (or words) translating your Hebrew or Greek word. It's an amazing resource.

If you do not have an internet connection, but you do have access to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, it is still possible to achieve the same results. It is just more work. Here are the steps.

1. Look up the word in the Hebrew or Greek dictionary using the number as the key. All the words in each dictionary are in numerical order.
2. Write down all the English words that are listed *after the dash* (everything before the dash is a brief definition). These are the words that the KJV uses to translate the Greek or Hebrew word you are studying. Sometimes there will be only one word listed, but sometimes there will be a good handful.
3. For each of the words listed after the dash, go to the Main Concordance and look up that word.
4. For the verses listed, scan down the right margin of the column and locate every instance where the Strong's number of your Greek or Hebrew word is listed.
5. Look up the verses with the matching numbers in your Bible. If you use the King James Bible, you will see the word exactly as indicated in the concordance. Behind that word lies your Greek or Hebrew word. If you do not use the King James Bible, you will have to figure out what word or words your own translation uses to translate the Greek or Hebrew word. But it is there in the original Greek or Hebrew of this verse.

Chapter 1

“The Simple Ones”: Four Famous “Hell” Verses That Don’t Actually Teach Everlasting Torment

Why We are Talking about This Now

If I wanted to present this topic in the most orderly way, the chapter after this one would probably come first. That’s because if we really want to understand the Bible’s pictures of the ultimate fate of the unrepentant, we need to be able to understand how they fit within the Bible’s overall picture of the end of the world. For instance, how does the fate of the unrepentant relate to the end of this age? How does it relate to the second coming of Jesus Christ as “the judge of the living and the dead”?¹ How does it relate to the age of “renewal of all things” that begins when Jesus comes in glory to reign (Mt. 19:28)? How does it relate to the thousand-year reign of Jesus and the faithful witnesses in Revelation 20, and to the new creation of Rev. 21:1-8? The fate of the unrepentant isn’t just a free-floating Bible topic that makes sense all by itself—it is a crucial theme within the overall picture of the future in the Bible. Therefore those who lack a correct understanding of the Bible’s pictures of the future fate of humanity and of the end of the world in general are going to find it difficult to reach a correct understanding of the things the Bible says about the fate of the unrepentant.

All the same, it’s worth taking a look at some of the best-known passages right now, as a way of getting started on the topic. It’s actually simple to show that these familiar passages are not talking about everlasting torment. Once we’ve gotten our feet wet, we are going to take a step back and work on getting a foundational understanding of the bigger picture. I promise that learning more about the bigger picture will be interesting on its own merits. Having done that, we’ll be able to return to looking at specific passages, and we’ll be able to decide with a good amount of confidence whether they intend to teach the idea of everlasting torment.

¹ See Acts 10:42; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 4:5.-

Simple One #1:

“Gehenna, where ‘their worm doesn’t die, and the fire doesn’t get put out’...”

Mk 9:48 (quoting Isa. 66:24)

⁴⁷It’s better for you to go into the Kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes, and get thrown into Gehenna—⁴⁸where “their worm doesn’t die, and the fire doesn’t get put out.”¹

This is often the first Bible passage preachers go to when they want to prove the idea of hell as a place of everlasting torment. But that interpretation falls all to pieces when you look at the passage with any care. Let’s have a look at what’s going on.

In the first place, those quote marks show that Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament (hereafter “OT”) book of the prophet Isaiah. He’s quoting from the very last verse in the whole book of 66 chapters. We’ll look at that in just a minute. But let’s get some basic information out on the table before we get to that. First, the OT was written in the Hebrew language (except for a very few passages in Aramaic), and all of the NT was written in Greek. Secondly, there is no Hebrew word in the OT, or Greek word in the NT, that means what most people think of when they hear the word “hell.” When the translators of the King James Version (followed by many familiar contemporary translations like the NIV, ESV, and NASB) translate the word “Gehenna”² in the passage above as “hell,” they end up hiding from you, the reader, the vivid OT reference that Jesus is making. Gehenna is a Hebrew or Aramaic word that means “the Valley of the Son of Hinnom.” This valley, or ravine, is also known as “Topheth,” and it lies right outside the southern walls of Jerusalem. During the years of Judah’s political independence, it was a horrible place where kings would burn their children as an offering to the false god Moloch.³ Jeremiah refers to this valley using both of its names—Topheth and the Valley of Ben [the Son of] Hinnom—in the following prophecy:

Jer. 7:31-32

³¹ They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. ³² So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.

In Isaiah, Topheth is the place where God is going to burn the king of Assyria alive with fire and sulfur, in a parody of a kingly funeral pyre:

¹ See Mk 9:43-48 || Mt. 18:8-9, quoting Isa. 66:24. Two parallel lines (“||”) indicate that passages are parallel.

² Gr. *geenna*, Strong’s #G1067.

³ See 2 Kgs 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6 Isa. 30:33; Jer. 7:31-32; 19:6-14; 32:35.

Isa. 30:29-33, esp. v. 33

²⁹ And you will sing
 as on the night you celebrate a holy festival;
 your hearts will rejoice
 as when people playing pipes go up
 to the mountain of the LORD,
 to the Rock of Israel.

³⁰ The LORD will cause people to hear his majestic voice
 and will make them see his arm coming down
 with raging anger and consuming fire,
 with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.

³¹ The voice of the LORD will shatter Assyria;
 with his rod he will strike them down.

³² Every stroke the LORD lays on them
 with his punishing club
 will be to the music of timbrels and harps,
 as he fights them in battle with the blows of his arm.

³³ Topheth has long been prepared;
 it has been made ready for the king.
 Its fire pit has been made deep and wide,
 with an abundance of fire and wood;
 the breath of the LORD,
 like a stream of burning sulfur,
 sets it ablaze.

What is this about? Isaiah lived in the last third of the eighth century BC. At that time, the Assyrian army, led by their king, was going around the whole Middle East and burning every city, village, and field they passed. This successfully terrorized the nations, and showed them who was boss. In this passage, God promises that he is going to turn the tables on the king of Assyria, and burn him up when he tries to attack Jerusalem. No one in the ancient world was more feared than the king of Assyria. Yet Isaiah prophesies that the faithful people of Jerusalem are going to be singing hymns and celebrating as God destroys the king and his ruthless army (v. 32; see the background verses, Isa. 30:18-26). This is what Gehenna suggests to the imagination of a person who knows biblical prophecy: a place just outside the walls of Jerusalem, where God will completely burn up and destroy the dangerous enemies that try to attack the holy city.

Now that we have some biblical background, let's look at very last verses of Isaiah, from which Jesus is quoting in Mk 9:48:

Isa. 66:22-24

²² “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure. ²³ From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,” says the LORD. ²⁴ “And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

When you compare this passage (and its context, Isa. 65:17-25) to Isa. 30:29-33, which we just read, you can see that a very similar story is being told. When God creates a new heavens and a new earth and a New Jerusalem (see Isa. 65:17-18; 66:22), those who love him will be completely safe. They will never again have to fear being attacked. God himself promises to be their protector (see Isa. 65:21-23; 66:12-16). Thanks to God’s protection, the faithful people of the New Jerusalem will go out and see the dead bodies of their enemies lying there in total disgrace. These lifeless corpses are going to be burned up by fire and eaten by maggots—a process that no one, and nothing, is going to stop. The fire and the maggots are God’s agents for completely removing death and deathliness from the new creation.

It is worth double-underlining the fact that people go out to look at *the inert corpses* of the rebels (Isa. 66:24). Nothing here suggests the idea of torment at all—let alone unending torment. If you want to imagine something lasting forever here, perhaps the best candidate for that would be the *disgrace* of the rebellious and violent enemies that God removes from the new creation.¹

Someone will ask, “Doesn’t ‘unquenchable fire’ encourage us to think of a kind of Promethean scenario, in which people are consciously tormented forever?”² There are two simple answers to this question. First, *there are no living people to be tormented*. The unstoppable fire and undying maggots here consume *corpses*—removing their rotting flesh from the land and preventing the outbreak of disease.



¹ The Hebrew word for disgrace (rendered as “loathsome” by NIV) is *der’aown* (Strong’s #H1860), which only occurs twice in the whole OT: Isa. 66:24 and Dan. 12:2. In Dan. 12:2, an angel tells Daniel that some people are going to be subject to “everlasting disgrace.”

² Prometheus, in the famous Greek myth, is a god who steals fire from Zeus and shares it with the human race. Zeus becomes furious and binds him to a rock, appointing an eagle (the symbol of Zeus) as his torturer. The eagle returns every day and eats his liver, which grows back so that he experiences unending torment (see Hesiod, *Theogony*, 507–616; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*). The image above is from a Greek postage stamp, and based on a sixth-century BCE Laconian cup housed in the Etruscan Museum in the Vatican. A very similar myth has Tityos, son of Zeus and attempted rapist of Leto, attacked daily by two vultures in Tartarus, the deepest underworld. Like Prometheus, his liver, when eaten, grows back so he can be tormented again. The church father Lactantius actually suggests that the Greek poets reimagined the everlasting fire in the Bible as the vultures in the story of Tityos (*Divine Institutes* 7.21).

Secondly, we need to look not to the myths of the pagan Greeks, but to the inspired scriptures of the OT, to understand what Isaiah and Jesus mean when they warn that the unrepentant will be burnt up by “unquenched” fire and/or have their corpses greedily devoured by worms that scavenge on dead things. A study of the OT reveals that the idea of being devoured by inescapable fire or scavengers is repeated often, and that it has a definite meaning: a complete and total destruction that is utterly unavoidable.¹ If we use Scripture to interpret Scripture, we discover that *Mk 10:48* says *nothing about everlasting torment, and everything about total and inescapable destruction.*

They say a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. We’ve just taken that first step. We’ve learned that this famous saying from the teaching of Jesus, when understood in context of its direct OT background in the prophecy of Isaiah, says something entirely different from what people usually take it to mean. By the end of this book, we’re going to look closely at every single passage in the NT that has been used to support a belief in everlasting torment. Consider this as a down payment. Does it seem hard to imagine that the end for the unrepentant might look like a final battle outside the New Jerusalem (Isa. 66:24), rather than people being thrown into a chamber of never-ending tortures? If so, I totally understand that. It takes a while for it to sink in that there is a completely different story in Scripture than most of us have been led to believe. But the further we get into this, the more you’ll begin to notice that pieces of the puzzle that never made sense before now make perfect sense. For example, consider Heb. 10:26-27:

²⁶Because if we sin deliberately after we’ve received the knowledge of the truth, there’s no sacrifice for sins left anymore. ²⁷There’s only the terrible expectation of judgment, and a furious fire that’s going to burn up the enemies.²

The author of Hebrews here warns about final judgment and punishment for the unrepentant, and in doing so he quotes from Isa. 26:11, which is yet another prophecy of a final attack on a peaceful and renewed Jerusalem—an attack in which the enemies are devoured by fire just as in Isa. 66:24. There is a reason for this, and by the end of this book the reason will be clear. It’s going to be a reason that makes excellent sense of a great number of specific NT passages and the OT prophecies that lie behind them. What’s more, completely unlike the doctrine of everlasting torment, it will be a reason that stands in close harmony with the larger teachings of

¹ Chapter 1 of *The End of the Unrepentant* quotes in full and comments on all the passages in the OT with this theme. For the sake of space, I simply offer you the references so that you can look them up: Deut. 28:26; 29:19-28; 2 Kgs 22:16-17; 2 Chron. 34:25; Isa. 47:14-15; 50:11; 51:6-8; 66:22-24; Jer. 4:4; 7:20; 15:14; 17:27; 34:22; 37:8, 10; Ezek. 15:1-8; 20:47; 21:28, 31-32; 37:21-28, 38:8; Amos 5:6.

² Lit. “consume the hostile ones.” See Isa. 26:11.

Jesus and the writers of the NT about God's loving and just character. Keep reading! It's all going to make sense.

Simple One #2: "...go into Gehenna—into the fire that can't be put out"

Mk 9:43 || Mt. 18:8-9

⁴³And if your hand trips you up, cut it off. It's better for you to go into life with a disability¹ than to have two hands, and go into Gehenna—into the fire that can't be put out.

I have heard people argue, "It's one thing to quote Mk 9:48, which talks about a fire that *is not* put out. But what about Mk 9:43, which says Gehenna has a fire that *can't be* put out? Isn't that because it is an *everlasting* fire?" If anyone wants to know what Jesus means by "fire that can't be put out," all they have to do is have a look at the roots of that idea in OT prophecy.² Christians believe that Jesus is the Word of God, who speaks the words of God,³ and his apostles teach that the message of the prophets of the OT is God's word in written form.⁴ So I invite my Christian readers to join me in expecting that the words of Jesus and the words of the prophets are going to *agree*, and that they are going to make sense when we read them *together*. So *what is* the OT background of "fire that can't be put out"? It turns out that this idea appears numerous times in the OT, and that it connotes *a complete destruction that cannot be resisted*, rather than a fire that miraculously burns forever. For those who know the prophets, a fire "that can't be put out" is an *irresistible, inescapable* fire—a fire that burns effectively until it finishes destroying what it is sent by God to destroy. Here are a few among many examples:

Isa. 47:14-15

¹⁴Behold, they are like stubble,
the fire consumes them;
they cannot deliver themselves
from the power of the flame.
No coal for warming oneself is this,
no fire to sit before!

Jer. 4:4

⁴Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,
remove the foreskin of your hearts,
O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem;

¹ Or "maimed."

² E.g. 2 Kgs 22:16-17 || 2 Chron. 34:25; Jer. 4:4; 7:20; 17:20; 21:10, 12, 14; Ezek. 20:47; Amos 5:6.

³ Jn 1:1-18; 6:68; 1 Jn 1:1-4.

⁴ E.g. Mt. 26:54; Lk. 4:21; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 1:19-20.

lest my wrath go forth like fire,
and burn with none to quench it,
because of the evil of your deeds.

Jer. 17:27

²⁷But if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched.

Ezek. 20:47

⁴⁷Say to the forest of the Negeb, Hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree. The blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it.

Amos 5:6

⁶Seek the LORD and live,
lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel...

What are the prophets talking about when they speak of fire that is going to burn “with no one to quench it”? They’re talking about a fire that comes as a consequence of refusing God’s final warning to repent. It is a raging fire from which there is no hope of rescue. It is fire sent as final judgment from God, and therefore, it is fire that those under judgment are going to be completely unable to put out. This fire is the fire of *unstoppable and irrevocable destruction*, not a tormenting fire that magically burns forever. How does that background help us understand Jesus’ statement that the fire of Gehenna “can’t be put out”? It tells us that although God is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exod. 34:6-7; Ps. 145:8-9, 17), that’s not at all the same thing as saying God has a permissive or passive attitude towards destructive elements in his creation. Mercy and grace speak of God’s active willingness to give his created beings a completely new start when they need it, at his own expense. But if created beings steadfastly refuse to repent, they have no basis for hoping that God will not ultimately pull the plug on them. As Creator, God has—and will eventually use—his sovereign right to eliminate stubbornly destructive beings from his creation. When it gets to that point, there will be no use saying, “Hey, hey, hey! Wait up a minute! I changed my mind! *Really* this time!” The destruction that issues from God’s final negative judgment is a fire that *cannot be put out*—neither by those who are condemned, nor by anyone else. God’s love is free, and his grace is universal,

but some creatures refuse to respond to his love and grace. In his infinite wisdom, God will ultimately decide—as is his right—when it is of no profit to keep extending mercy to those who keep choosing to live destructively. When that point is reached, there is going to be no stopping the fire of destruction. As Isaiah the prophet testifies, some beings are destined to prove incorrigible, no matter how much grace and amnesty are offered to them:

Isa. 57:19-21

¹⁹ “Peace, peace, to the far and the near,” says the LORD;

“and I will heal him.

²⁰ But the wicked are like the tossing sea

for it cannot be quiet;

and its waters toss up mire and dirt.

²¹ There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

Simple One #3: “Out there there’s going to be people crying and grinding their teeth”¹

Mt. 8:11-12

¹¹I’m telling you, lots of people are going to come from the East and from the West and eat the banquet dinner² with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Heaven’s Reign. ¹²But some of the children of God’s Reign³ are going to be thrown outside in the darkness. Out there, there’s going to be people crying and grinding their teeth.

To people used to believing in the traditional idea of hell, this passage suggests an image of people in never-ending physical torment. I know this is gruesome, but when you think about it, crying and teeth-grinding is not actually what you’d expect to see a person doing, if they were in physical torment. To be honest, you’d expect them to be writhing and screaming. The truth is that there is a completely different explanation for their anguish—an explanation that’s right there at hand in the saying itself. Jesus says that some people expect to be treated as honored guests at the great Messianic Banquet that inaugurates the glorious world to come (see Isa. 25:8, which we’ll be looking at in the next chapter). But they’ll suddenly find themselves ejected from the banquet hall, with no hope of being allowed back in. It’s totally realistic to imagine these people crying hot tears of humiliation and shame, and grinding their

¹ The KJV renders this “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

² Lit. “come and lie down with Abraham...” People in Jesus’ time used to recline on couches when eating at a banquet. In Luke’s version, the addition of the words “the banquet” alludes to Isa. 25:6.

³ Lit. “the children of the kingdom,” but this phrase means “some of those who are children of the kingdom,” not “all the children of the kingdom.”

teeth in frustration, envy, and despair. Where did I get this very specific idea about what Jesus has in mind? *I got it from Jesus himself.*

Lk. 13:24-28

²⁴Try your hardest to go in through the narrow doorway. Because I'm telling you, a lot of people are going to try to go in, and they're not going to be able to. ²⁵After the owner of the house gets up and locks the door, then you'll start showing up outside to knock on the door. You'll be saying, 'Sir, open up for us!' And he'll say back to you, 'I don't know where you're from.' ²⁶Then you'll start saying, 'We used to eat and drink right there with you!¹ You taught in our public places!'² ²⁷And he's going to be saying to you, 'I don't know you, or where you're from. Stay away from me, all you who keep doing wrong!'³ ²⁸**There's going to be crying and teeth-grinding out there, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets in God's Reign—and yourselves excluded outside.**⁴

In this last statement, Jesus is alluding to Isa. 65:13-15, which is part of the same passage that we saw him quoting above in Mk 9:48. Let's look at it:

Isa. 65:11-15

¹¹ But [as for] you who forsake the LORD,
 who forget my holy mountain,
 who set a table for Fortune
 and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny,
¹³ ...thus says the Lord GOD:
 "Behold, my servants shall eat,
 but you shall be hungry;
 behold, my servants shall drink,
 but you shall be thirsty;
 behold, my servants shall rejoice,
 but you shall be put to shame;
¹⁴ behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart,
 but you shall cry out for pain of heart
 and shall wail for breaking of spirit.
¹⁵ You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse,
 and the Lord GOD will put you to death,
 but his servants he will call by another name.

¹ Lit. "right in front of you."

² Lit. "marketplaces" or "main streets."

³ Lit. "all you perpetrators of injustice."

⁴ Lit. "kicked out outside."

In this passage, it's obviously people who have ignored and abandoned the LORD (see 65:11-12) who are crying, wailing, and feeling "broken in spirit." They are in total misery. Why? Is it because they are being tortured? No. It's because the moment of salvation and renewal has come for the faithful, but they have been anything but faithful. They've been doing their own thing and serving their favorite false gods, like "Fortune" and "Destiny." But now they're confronted with the fact that God really is sovereign, and God really is Savior. Those who have held on to their loyalty to God now have relief, but the disloyal, the apostates, have the utter shock of being rejected by the One they've been rejecting. Nothing lies ahead for them but the death penalty. They eat themselves up with fruitless remorse, envy, frustration, and despair. The bottom line: they're not being tormented by God, and their misery is short-lived, because they're about to be executed (vv. 12, 15).

When Jesus talks about people grinding their teeth, he's also alluding to Ps. 112:9-10, which makes exactly the same point:

Ps. 112:9-10

⁹ [The righteous person] has distributed freely; he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever;
his horn is exalted in honor.

¹⁰ The wicked man sees it and is angry;
he gnashes his teeth and melts away;
the desire of the wicked will perish!

Jesus loved the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets, and he knew them inside and out. He also obviously looked on the OT as the completely authoritative word of God (see Mt. 5:18; Jn 10:34-35). If Christians want to understand the things he says, they need to learn to recognize his OT allusions and to interpret his words in the context of the scriptures that he refers to. Crying and teeth-grinding (traditionally, "weeping and gnashing of teeth") is about the anguish of exclusion, and it has no real connection at all to the notion of everlasting torment.

By the way, it's important to notice that *none* of the passages containing this phrase refers to "Gehenna" (see also Mt. 8:11-12 || Lk. 13:28; Mt. 22:1-14; 24:45-51; 25:14-30). *If* Gehenna were meant to be understood as a place of endless Promethean tortures, *and* we were supposed to understand "weeping and gnashing of teeth" as the effects of such tortures, then it would have been the most natural thing in the world to find Jesus using the two kinds of language together in the same sayings. They *never* appear together. In this, as in so many other cases, an accurate interpretation requires taking into account the ways in which the scriptures link together and assist in the interpretation of one another. Ignoring the relationship between the words of Jesus and the psalms and prophecies he alludes to is a sure recipe for misunderstanding.

Simple One #4: The Rich Man Agonizes in the Flames of “Hell”

Lk. 16:19-31 (The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus)

¹⁹There was once a rich man. He used to wear clothes with expensive dyes and fine material,¹ and he'd eat glorious meals every day. ²⁰And there was a poor man called Lazarus, who used to flop down² outside³ his door, all covered with open sores. ²¹And he'd be desperate to fill his stomach with the things that were tossed out from the rich man's kitchen.⁴ But instead, the dogs would come and lick his open sores. ²²Now it happened that the poor man died, and he was carried off by the angels into the arms of Abraham. The rich man died too, and was buried. ²³And in Hades he was in torture. He looked up and saw Abraham from a long ways away, and Lazarus in his arms. ²⁴He shouted out, “Father Abraham! Have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, so he can dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue! I'm in terrible pain in this fire!”⁵ ²⁵But Abraham said, “Child, remember, you got the good things⁶ in your life, and likewise, Lazarus got the bad things. But now he's here being comforted, and you're in terrible pain. ²⁶However,⁷ a deep canyon has been put in place between us and all of you. So people that want to go across to you can't do it, and people can't cross from there to us either.” ²⁷And the rich man said, “Then I want to ask you something, Father. Send Lazarus to my father's house. ²⁸Because I have five brothers. That way he can warn them, so that they don't come to this place of torture.” ²⁹But Abraham said, “They have Moses and the prophets. They should listen to them.” ³⁰But he said, “Please, no, father Abraham! But if somebody goes to them from among the dead, then they'll change their hearts.”⁸ ³¹But he said to him, “If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't pay attention even if somebody rises from among the dead.”

There are quite a few interesting things about this parable, which might better be described as a *tale*. But we're only going to concern ourselves with things that have to do with the relationship between this story and “hell.” How did this passage get to be about “hell” in the first place? Simply because the translators of the King James Version of the Bible translated the Greek word *hadēs*⁹ (Hades, v. 23) as “hell.” But

¹ Lit. “and he was clothed with purple and fine linen,” i.e. fine, high quality clothes.

² Or “get put down.”

³ Lit. “in front of.”

⁴ Lit. “the things that fell from his table.” I think it refers to the food that got thrown away, not what literally fell off the table by accident.

⁵ Lit. “flame.”

⁶ Lit. “your good things.”

⁷ Or “And in any case,” or, “But be that as it may.”

⁸ Traditionally: “repent.”

⁹ Strong's #G86.

if hell is a place where people go after being resurrected for judgment and condemned to a punishment of everlasting torment, then *this obviously is not hell*. It's clear enough that the rich man is pictured as being in torment (vv. 23-24). But according to the story, the rich man goes to Hades immediately when he dies, just as Lazarus had been carried to the arms of Abraham when he died. In the Mediterranean world, Hades was generally pictured as the underworld, the place of the shades of the dead. It was imagined as a great cavern situated beneath the earth, just as heaven is situated above the earth (e.g. Mt. 11:23 || Lk. 10:15). The NT writers speak of Hades as a temporary holding place where people go when they die, while they await resurrection (e.g. Acts 2:27, 31; Rev. 20:13).¹

Are we supposed to imagine that the rich man is going to be resurrected from Hades at some point? If so, what will happen to him then? How literally or non-literally are we supposed to interpret the story's pictures of comfort and torment? This story doesn't contain answers to these questions, nor does Jesus or Luke interpret it. Jesus says elsewhere that everyone is eventually going to be raised, some to a resurrection of life, and others to a resurrection of judgment (Jn 5:28-29). Given that the rich man has resurrection and judgment ahead of him, his current state amounts to pre-trial custody. *His tormented condition in Hades is not everlasting*. It is *not* his final state. You simply can't get any support for a doctrine of everlasting torment from this passage.

What We've Learned in this Chapter from Looking at "the Simple Ones"

We've looked at four of the most familiar passages in the Bible about the fate of the unrepentant. Regardless of what most people have been taught, not one of the four contains the idea of everlasting torment. By the end of this book, we're going to have looked squarely at every single passage in the NT about the ultimate fate of the unrepentant. And by the time we're done, we will have discovered a very clear and consistent message in the Bible: those who insist on misusing the gifts and powers of created life are going to be removed from God's creation. In a word, they are going to be annihilated.² But the first step towards appreciating the clarity of this message is to get a solid basic understanding of the Bible's picture of the future of humanity and the world. This subject is known as biblical eschatology, the study of the Bible's teaching about the events surrounding the transition from this current creation and age of history to a new creation and the world to come. Let's get to it.

¹ In Rev. 1:18 Jesus says he has the keys of Hades, which is to say, he has the authority and power to resurrect people who have died. The "abyss" (Gr. *abyssos*, Strong's #G12), also sometimes translated as "the bottomless pit," can be looked upon in the same way: see Rom. 10:7; Rev. 11:7; 17:8.

² This is a theological statement, not a scientific one. If you prefer to imagine that they are turned into re-useable molecular components such as calcium, phosphorus, carbon dioxide, and water vapor, feel free. See Jer. 18:1-5; Rom. 9:19-22.

Chapter 2

The First Part of the Eschatological Puzzle: The Changing of the Ages in the Bible

One of the things that gets people off to an immediate wrong start is the standard—but incorrect—idea that the Bible only knows of two ages: this current age, and an everlasting age to come. We're going to see later that this one mistake, all by itself, can lead people to the false impression that the Bible teaches everlasting torment. But the notion that there are just two ages is wrong, and it's easy to demonstrate that it's wrong. And I'll be explaining just how it is that getting this wrong leads to particular mistaken conclusions about the final fate of the unrepentant. But for now, it's time to lay a solid foundation of understanding about the idea of the changing of the ages in the Bible.

The Changing of the Ages in the Old Testament

First off, let's quickly consider the historical and wisdom books of the OT and the poetic works outside of the Psalter.¹ It's a fair generalization to say that the writers of these books, when (or if) they consider the future, they look on it as a continuous, indefinitely extended time. For them, the thing that makes one time different from another is this: if people act rightly, they can expect a time of blessing from God and good experiences, but if they act wrongly, they can expect trouble and disaster. We find a very different perspective in the psalmists and the prophets of the OT. They look ahead in hope to a moment when this world is going to suddenly and completely change for the better. Like many people in our world, what they actually experience on a daily basis is war, poverty, and injustice. But in prayer and prophetic inspiration, they envision a time when God will come down from heaven and set things right once for all.

God is coming to judge the earth! He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity (Ps. 98:9).

It's important to note that the psalmists and the prophets (along with all OT writers) believe that God is the Creator of the world, and so they would affirm that God has always ruled as King, and indeed rules now.² But they believe that there is a decisive

¹ I refer here to all the books of the OT except Psalms and Isaiah through Malachi.

² E.g. Ps. 10:16; 29:10; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 103:19; 145:13; Jer. 10:10; Dan. 4:3, 17, 34.

moment coming in the future when God will no longer permit injustice and evil to go on. They believe a day is coming when God will stop the flow of human history and put all things to rights. God will vindicate the innocent and disempower and punish those who do harm in the world. They envision a moment of world crisis, of God's radical intervention, which will lead to a new age in which God's justice and love will rule, and God's protection will forever surround the faithful.

It's also important to note that the psalmists and the prophets do not picture the transition to the "that age" situation, in which God's reign as Creator manifests itself fully on the earth. **CUT** Any one or a gradual one. Instead, they foresee a huge crisis that involves a decisive battle. In this crisis, all those who love violence and injustice are pictured as joining together to resist the coming of God's justice and peace, and a great confrontation takes place. Isaiah prays,

Isa. 64:1-2

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!

It is by defeating the enemies of the faithful and the peaceful that God will carve out a new world of justice, peace, and safety for them.

When John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, speak about the imminent coming of "the Kingdom of God," this is what they are referring to. Everyone who knows the Psalms and the Prophets knows that the coming of the Kingdom of God signals the removal of everything contrary to God's will, so that humanity and all of creation can live in harmony. This implies that those who repent, who are learning to live in harmony with God's ways in this age and this mortal life, will be invited to take part in the renovated and healed world that is soon to appear. It also implies that those who stubbornly live in a way that is harmful—that is out of harmony with God's ways—will be excluded. "This age," the age in which we live, is obviously a mixed age. It contains people who are striving to live in right relationship with God and their fellow created beings, and also people who habitually live in a way that harms their fellow created beings and offends God. "That age," the age to come, will be an age in which love and justice are universal, for a specific reason: the unrepentant will not be allowed to be a part of it.

Let's now look at some OT passages from the Psalms and the Prophets that exemplify this hope. You'll notice that none of them uses the specific terminology of "this age" and "that age," or "the age to come," which we frequently encounter in the NT. Nonetheless, they all picture God's future coming to the earth and to

humanity as creation's Judge and King. And they all picture this coming, this arrival, as the inaugural moment of a completely new regime: God's reign of universal justice and peace.

Psalm 46

- ⁸ Come and see what the LORD has done,
the desolations [deserted places] he has brought on the earth.
- ⁹ He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
- ¹⁰ He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."
- ¹¹ The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

This prophetic psalm imagines the future intervention of God as though it has just happened. Making wars cease (v. 9) isn't going to be as simple as persuading people to lay down their weapons. God is going to have to destroy the technologies of war, and with them, those who refuse to let go of them. The "the deserted places" are the places where the people who were addicted to war used to live.

Psalm 96

- ¹⁰ Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns."
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.
- ¹¹ Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
- ¹² Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
- ¹³ Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

The Hebrews, offspring of the original Hebrew, Abraham, and known after the Exile as the Jews, tended to think that they were chosen to be God's own people because God had no interest in the wellbeing of any other nation. But God's blessing of Abraham, from the beginning, was that through Abraham and his offspring "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Gal. 3:8). Psalm 96 shows that God's coming as Judge and King will bring justice for all

peoples and all nations. The whole creation, and the living earth itself (vv. 11-13), will rejoice when God comes in glory, because this will put an end to human mistreatment of the creation and signal the moment of healing for the non-human world damaged by our sin.¹

Psalm 97

- ¹ The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!
- ² Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- ³ Fire goes before him
and burns up his adversaries all around.
- ⁴ His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
- ⁵ The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,
before the Lord of all the earth.

Note that though the faithful throughout the world welcome God's coming, there is also the indication of allied human resistance to God's reign—which results in the fiery destruction of all God's enemies (v. 3). Also note that the most massive features of the physical world are dissolved, thrown into chaos. This is a hint that the physical world will need to be transformed at the moment when God comes to reign in glory.

Psalm 2

- ¹ Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
- ² The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
- ³ “Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”
- ⁴ The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
- ⁵ He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
- ⁶ “I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”
- ⁷ I will proclaim the LORD's decree:

¹ On this, see Rom. 8:18-23; 2 Pet. 3:3-13; Rev. 11:18; 21:1-7. We'll look at all of those passages later on.

He said to me, “You are my son;
 today I have become your father.
⁸ Ask me,
 and I will make the nations your inheritance,
 the ends of the earth your possession.
⁹ You will break them with a rod of iron;
 you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”¹

Psalm 2 pictures God, together with his Son the King (the LORD’s “anointed one,” v. 2), ruling from Jerusalem’s Mount Zion. God gives notice to the heads of all the nations that his Son is now the authorized ruler of the whole earth (v. 6). Like Psalm 46 and Psalm 97, this psalm does not envision a peaceful transition to God’s (and the Anointed One’s) rule. It envisions the rebellious nations banding together to fight to the bitter end against God’s chosen king of the world, and being destroyed completely (v. 9). This is effectively a prophecy of the birth of a new age in which the kingdom of God’s anointed Son (called “Messiah” in the NT, from the Hebrew word for “anointed”) will extend to “the ends of the earth” (v. 8). The psalms we have just looked at are not the only psalms that look ahead in hope to a moment when God will intervene to judge the earth and vindicate the oppressed once for all, establishing a never-ending kingdom of justice and peace.² But these will be enough to give you a good sense of the pattern of future expectation in the psalms.

Let’s now have a look at how the Prophets see the future. Many of their visions and oracles resonate closely with those of the psalms we just read.

Isaiah 2:2-4

² In the last days
 the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established
 as the highest of the mountains;
 it will be exalted above the hills,
 and all nations will stream to it.
³ Many peoples will come and say,
 “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
 to the temple of the God of Jacob.
 He will teach us his ways,
 so that we may walk in his paths.”
 The law will go out from Zion,
 the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
⁴ He will judge between the nations

¹ See also Psalm 110, which is close in theme.

² See also Ps. 82:8; 94:1-11, 20-23; 110:1-7.

and will settle disputes for many peoples.
 They will beat their swords into plowshares
 and their spears into pruning hooks.
 Nation will not take up sword against nation,
 nor will they train for war anymore.¹

As in Ps. 96:11-13 above, those on earth who love God and yearn to see God's ways prevail will experience joy and delight on the day when God comes to make an end of war and injustice. But it will be a fearful and traumatic day for the privileged, the powerful, and the idolaters:

Isaiah 2:10-12, 17-18

¹⁰ Go into the rocks, hide in the ground
 from the fearful presence of the LORD
 and the splendor of his majesty!
¹¹ The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled
 and human pride brought low;
 the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.
¹² The LORD Almighty has a day in store
 for all the proud and lofty,
 for all that is exalted
 (and they will be humbled),
 ...
¹⁷ The arrogance of man will be brought low
 and human pride humbled;
 the LORD alone will be exalted in that day,
¹⁸ and the idols will totally disappear.²

The glorious coming of the LORD won't just make things better. It will revolutionize the world, removing every person, high and low, who lives in pride and godlessness. To the ends of the earth, worship of false idols will cease.

Isaiah 11

¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
 from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
 the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
 the Spirit of counsel and of might,
 the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—

¹ See Ps. 46:9.

² See Isa. 2:5-22 for the full oracle of the crisis phase of the "Day of the LORD" (vv. 12, 20).

- ³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
⁵ Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
⁷ The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.
¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the
nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Just as in Psalms 2 and 110, Isaiah looks for God's coming in judgment to transform the world through a Davidic Messiah.¹ Those who do evil will be slain and removed from the earth (v. 4), and never again will violence mar the creation, either the violence of humans or animals (vv. 6-9a). The knowledge of God will completely saturate the world (vv. 9b-10).

This is a good first opportunity to learn a lesson on how to assemble the composite biblical picture, the biblical picture puzzle, of the future of the world. OT passages do not always mention the role of God's Anointed One, Messiah, when they picture the great transformation to a new age at God's coming in glory as Judge and King. But the very many points of similarity between messianic passages and the glorious coming passages that don't mention Messiah have led the Jews and all the NT writers to the understanding that God's kingdom and Messiah's kingdom are one kingdom, and God's coming in glory and Messiah's coming in glory are one

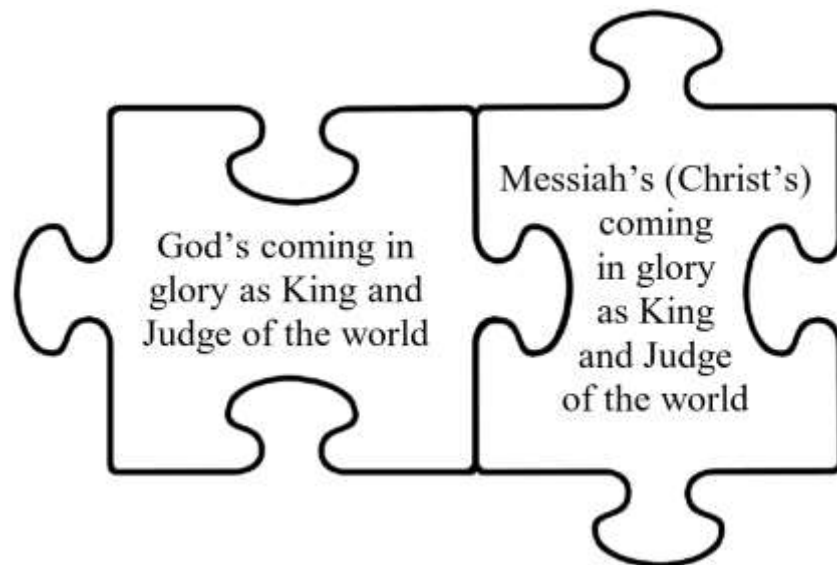
¹ The sprout from stump of Jesse's tree (vv. 1, 10) is a poetic way of referring to a descendant of David's family—since Jesse was David's father. In fact, the image suggests a “new David.”

coming. For example, John the Baptist preaches the coming of God as King and Judge of all, and he also preaches that the One coming after him, Messiah, will be God's agent in dispensing judgment and bringing in the Kingdom (Mt. 3:1-12; Mk 1:1-8; Lk. 3:1-18). To take another example from the other end of the NT, Rev. 6:12-17 paints a picture of a traumatic encounter between God, coming in glory, and the unrepentant on earth.

Rev. 6:12-17

¹⁴And the sky¹ was split apart like a scroll curling up. And every mountain and island was thrown out of place.² ¹⁵And the rulers of the earth, and the influential, and the commanders, and the rich, and the powerful, and every slave and free person,³ hid themselves. They hid in caves, and among the rocks in the mountains. ¹⁶They said to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us! Hide us⁴ from the presence of the One who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷Because the great day of their wrath has come. Who can stand in front of them?"

This passage clearly alludes to the picture in Isaiah 2 that we just read, but the unrepentant aren't just terrified and desperate to hide from God (the Father), but "from the One who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb," i.e. Jesus, whose coming in glory as Messiah is the same as the Father's coming in glory. So we get a solid linkage, a solid fitting together, of these two end-time puzzle pieces:



¹ Or "heaven."

² Lit. "were moved out of their places."

³ In other words everybody, from the very top to the very bottom of the social ladder.

⁴ Isa. 2:10, 19, 21; Jer. 4:29; Hos. 10:8.

Isa. 24:19–25:8

- ¹⁹ The earth is broken up,
the earth is split asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.
- ²⁰ The earth reels like a drunkard,
it sways like a hut in the wind;
so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion
that it falls—never to rise again.
- ²¹ In that day the LORD will punish
the powers in the heavens above
and the kings on the earth below.
- ²² They will be herded together
like prisoners bound in a dungeon;
they will be shut up in prison
and be punished after many days.
- ²³ The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed;
for the LORD Almighty will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders—with great glory.
- ...
- ^{25:2} You have made the city a heap of rubble,
the fortified town a ruin,
the foreigners' stronghold a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.
- ...
- ⁵ You silence the uproar of foreigners;
as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is stilled.
- ⁶ On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
- ⁷ On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
- ⁸ he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;

he will remove his people's disgrace
 from all the earth.
 The LORD has spoken.

Here are all the themes we've been observing: God's coming in decisive judgment to the whole world, rescue of the faithful from attacking enemy nations (note "kings of the earth" in 24:21, along with 25:2-5), and the establishment of God's glorious, endless, worldwide reign. Even more explicitly than in Psalm 97 above, we see the transition to God's reign portrayed in terms of the complete breakdown of the physical environment (24:19-20).¹ Finally, in 25:8 we see a rare (for the OT) and amazing promise that when God comes to reign, the faithful will receive everlasting life. Note that a Messianic king is not mentioned here. Yet, in line with the linkage we have discerned, Jesus looks on the promised royal banquet of Isa. 25:6 as his own wedding banquet when he comes to reign in glory (see Mt. 8:11-12; 22:1-14; Lk. 13:22-30; 14:15-24; Rev. 19:4-9). Isaiah 24–25 pictures an absolute break between this age of human destructiveness (which ultimately leads to the total collapse of the human species and of the very earth itself, 24:19-20) and the coming age of God's kingdom, in which mortality and death will never again be experienced by the faithful.

Isaiah 64–66

This section is a lengthy prophetic poem about the total transformation that we have seen promised above. It begins with Isaiah's heartfelt prayer for God to come to the earth as Judge and Savior:

Isa. 64:1-2

¹ Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
 that the mountains would tremble before you!
² As when fire sets twigs ablaze
 and causes water to boil,
 come down to make your name known to your enemies

¹ Read the whole chapter. Because the overall context is absolutely worldwide, I interpret the "everlasting covenant" (or, more literally, "age-enduring covenant") of Isa. 24:5-6 as the covenant between God and Noah's family immediately after the flood. Before the flood, human beings had so filled the earth with evil and violence (Gen. 6:5-6, 12-13) that God had felt it was necessary to intervene in order to save the world from complete destruction at the hands of human beings. God's covenant with Noah reestablishes God's original covenant with and restates humanity's commission to fill the earth and nurture and manage the living world. In this commission humanity at the time of the flood had totally failed (see Gen. 1:26-28; 2:4-7, 15). When God makes an "everlasting/age-enduring covenant" with Noah (Gen. 9:1-3, 7-17), God's part of the contract is the commitment never again to destroy the earth with a flood; *humanity's corresponding responsibility is that it must never again destroy the earth.* Isa. 24:4-6, 17-20, alluded to in the last phrase of Rev. 11:18, pictures the final breach of this covenant on humanity's part. In a real sense, the post-flood age lasts as long as humanity keeps its part of the covenant, and the end of the age comes when it breaks its part of the covenant.

and cause the nations to quake before you!

³ For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

Just as David prays in Ps. 144:5-8, Isaiah is basically saying, “We need you down here!” He wishes that God’s enemies—those who do wrong on the earth—would be confronted by God’s awesome power just as the Israelites witnessed it in operation at Sinai (Exod. 19:18; Judg. 5:5). In God’s presence, the enemies will be swept away in a blaze like twigs used to boil water (v. 2; see also Nah. 1:5-6).

Isa. 65:17-19

¹⁷ See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.

¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.

¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.

God makes a radical promise here. Things won’t just be better when God answers Isaiah’s prayer and comes to the earth—the whole creation will be renovated, made new. The goodness of the new creation will be permanent: there will never again be any source of pain or sorrow (v. 19). This is the language of the in-breaking of an entirely new age.

Isa. 65:25

²⁵ The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will be the serpent’s food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD.

This beautiful promise reprises the oracle of Isa. 11:6-9, above. The “holy mountain” is Mount Zion, whose slopes in the new creation, symbolically speaking, stretch out over the whole earth.

Isa. 66:22-24

²² “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure. ²³ From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,” says the LORD.

²⁴ “And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

The promise to the faithful that their families will “endure” (v. 22) contains a small hint of the hope of everlasting life that we saw promised in Isa. 25:8. Those who are invited to take part in the new heavens and the new earth will faithfully fulfill their blessed role of worshipping God (v. 23). On the other hand, those who turn against God in this beautiful setting of the new creation will be slain outside the walls of the New Jerusalem. Their corpses will be handed over to destruction by unstoppable fire and maggots¹ (v. 24; see also Isa. 26:11, 20-21; Rev. 20:7-10).

Jer. 3:14-17

¹⁴ “Return, faithless people,” declares the LORD, “for I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a town and two from a clan—and bring you to Zion. ¹⁵ Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. ¹⁶ In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land,” declares the LORD, “people will no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the LORD.’ It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. ¹⁷ At that time they will call Jerusalem *the Throne of the LORD*,² and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts.

Jeremiah clearly pictures a future time when God will be intimately present on earth as King (in Jerusalem), a time when all the nations, side by side with the people of Judah and Israel, will worship God in peace and right relationship. Unlike Isaiah and some of the psalms, Jeremiah doesn’t present an explicit picture of a decisive and final world crisis or battle. His prophecies are almost always focused on the people of Judah, and they stay close to the themes of sin and repentance, exile and return.

¹ Or, more traditionally, “worms.” The Hebrew word *towla* ‘ (Strong’s #H8438), which is used in Isa. 66:24, can refer either to worms or maggots. It’s very probable that the author is thinking of maggots because the idea is that their corpses lie on the ground unburied as they are being consumed, and the wormy things you typically see on rotting flesh in the open air are maggots.

² Note the connection between the “throne” and the “ark,” both symbols of God’s intimate royal presence (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16).

Ezekiel is similar and even somewhat narrower than Jeremiah in his scope. There is no clear hope for the inclusion of the Gentile nations in Ezekiel. It is only said that if Gentiles immigrate, they are to be included (Ezek. 47:21).

Dan. 7:9-18

⁹ As I looked,
 thrones were set in place,
 and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
 His clothing was as white as snow;
 the hair of his head was white like wool.
 His throne was flaming with fire,
 and its wheels were all ablaze.
¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing,
 coming out from before him.
 Thousands upon thousands attended him;
 ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
 The court was seated,
 and the books were opened.

¹¹ Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. ¹² (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

¹³ In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man,¹ coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

¹⁵ I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. ¹⁶ I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this. So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: ¹⁷ “The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. ¹⁸ But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.”

In the scene that leads up to this vision (7:1-8), Daniel sees four outlandish monsters, symbolizing four great empires. The last of them tramples and crushes the rest—

¹ NIV footnote: The Aramaic phrase *bar enash* means human being. The phrase *son of man* is retained here because of its use in the New Testament as a title of Jesus, probably based largely on this verse.

symbolizing its successful takeover of the whole world (v. 7). But God convenes a trial of all humanity, and finds the fourth beast guilty. The court, with God as the Chief Justice, issues a triple ruling. (1) It consigns this last and uniquely powerful empire of human history to annihilating fire, v. 11, (2) it temporarily disempowers the others, v. 12, and (3) it hands the kingdom of the world over to “the people of the holy ones of the Most High,” v. 13. The holy ones are both saved and vindicated by God’s judicial decree (see vv. 21-27). An angel tells Daniel that when the holy ones have been given the kingdom, they will retain the kingdom “forever—forever and ever,” or, much more literally and accurately, “for the age, and for an age of ages” (v. 18). See also Dan. 2:44, which, in the LXX Greek version,¹ says the kingdom of the God of Heaven will arise and “will not be destroyed throughout the ages.”

Daniel’s vision pictures a radical divine intervention that stops human history in its tracks and inaugurates a completely new age. Indeed, the intervention, this great judgment or trial, results in a new and unending *sequence of ages*, in which God’s holy ones will reign on the earth. Some of the themes that we saw in Isaiah and the Psalms, such as upheaval in the natural world and the joyful reconciliation of the Gentiles,² are not fully explicit here. But we do get a dramatic presentation of the key element—the idea of a decisive intervention by God into human history that will instantly and permanently transform this world of human injustice.

Daniel 12:1-3, 13

¹ “At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. ² Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ Those who are wise³ will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”

...

¹ The LXX (Roman numeral 70), also known as the Septuagint, was the first major translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic OT into any other language—in this case, Greek. It was started in the 3rd century BCE and finished around 123 BCE. Most of the time, when NT writers quote the OT, they are quoting from the LXX. It was the Bible of Greek-speaking Jews around the world in the time of Jesus and the apostles, and it became the OT of the Gentile Christians.

² According to the angel, “all peoples, nations, and languages” are going to serve “the Human One” (see Num. 23:19; Job 16:21; 25:6; 35:8; Ps. 8:4; 80:17; 144:3; Isa. 51:12; 56:2; Ezek. 2:1 etc.), and “all dominions shall serve and obey them,” i.e. the holy ones. These statements hint, but do not state in so many words, that all nations will be drawn into the people of God as full and willing members (as in Ps. 47 and Isa. 66).

³ NIV footnote: Or *who impart wisdom*.

¹³ “As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.”

If we compare the material leading up to Dan. 12:1-3 (esp. 11:31-36) with Daniel 7, it becomes apparent that they are talking about the same age-ending crisis. Thus, when the angel says “At that time” (12:1), he means the time of the last great empire in history, whose final emperor, the “little horn,” will prosecute a deadly, and nearly successful, war of extermination against the holy ones. In this time of oppression, the holy ones “will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time.” (Dan. 7:25). An unmistakable connection is made to this final time of persecution when the angel explains in Dan. 12:7, “It will be for a time, times and half a time.¹ When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed.”

It would be easy, if we only had Daniel 7, to assume that Daniel’s vision in that chapter pictures *the surviving remnant* of the holy ones being vindicated in the judgment and inheriting the kingdom for the “age of the ages.” But Dan. 12:2-3 and 13 make it clear that even those among the faithful who have not survived to see the history-stopping intervention of God will be vindicated. They will be rescued from death to take up their “allotted inheritance” together with their fellow holy ones in the life of the ages to come.

Isaiah’s poem of deliverance in Isaiah 26, which follows on from Isaiah 24–25 above, presents a strikingly similar picture. In the context of the faithful being utterly at the end of their strength, facing national extinction, God rescues them by means of the miracle of resurrection:

Isa. 26:17-19

¹⁷ As a pregnant woman about to give birth
writhes and cries out in her pain,
so were we in your presence, LORD.

¹⁸ We were with child, we writhed in labor,
but we gave birth to wind.

We have not brought salvation to the earth,
and the people of the world have not come to life.

¹⁹ But your dead will live, LORD;
their bodies will rise—²

let those who dwell in the dust

¹ NIV footnote: Or *a year, two years and half a year*.

² The Hebrew here is mysterious. This line literally reads, “My corpse, they will arise!” The LXX of v. 19 reads, “The dead will arise, those in the tombs will wake up, and those in the earth will rejoice! For the dew that is with you [the LORD] is healing for them. But the earth of the ungodly will go down.” I think the LXX translator is trying to draw out the ideas behind Isaiah’s poetic imagery by paraphrasing.

wake up and shout for joy—
 your dew is like the dew of the morning;
 the earth will give birth to her dead.

Apart from Dan. 12:2-3, 13 and Isa. 26:19, the hope of resurrection is not taught explicitly anywhere in the OT.¹ We will talk more about resurrection when we get to the New Testament, where it is a standard feature among the hopes for the future. For now, we will continue on with our sequential tour through the Prophets.

Joel 3:12-21

¹² “Let the nations be roused;
 let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat,²
 for there I will sit
 to judge all the nations on every side.
¹³ Swing the sickle,
 for the harvest is ripe.
 Come, trample the grapes,
 for the winepress is full
 and the vats overflow—
 so great is their wickedness!”
¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes
 in the valley of decision!
 For the day of the LORD is near
 in the valley of decision.
¹⁵ The sun and moon will be darkened,
 and the stars no longer shine.
¹⁶ The LORD will roar from Zion
 and thunder from Jerusalem;
 the earth and the heavens will tremble.
 But the LORD will be a refuge for his people,
 a stronghold for the people of Israel.
¹⁷ “Then you will know that I, the LORD your God,
 dwell in Zion, my holy hill.
 Jerusalem will be holy;

¹ The OT passage that most Christians would call to mind in relation to resurrection, the dry bones vision of Ezek. 37:1-10, does not actually “teach resurrection explicitly.” That’s because in its own context, the vision of the coming to life of the dry bones is immediately given a *figurative* interpretation. The vision is explained in terms of the experience of deep discouragement in exile, and the promise of healing for that discouragement when God brings the people back from exile (Ezek. 37:11-14). Although some Jews of Jesus’ day took Ezekiel 37 “literally,” the “literal” interpretation of the day was that Ezekiel had called a literal slain army on a battlefield back to mortal life. They did not look on it as having to do with the future.

² *Jehoshaphat* means “The LORD judges.”

never again will foreigners invade her.
¹⁸ “In that day the mountains will drip new wine,
 and the hills will flow with milk;
 all the ravines of Judah will run with water.
 A fountain will flow out of the LORD’s house
 and will water the valley of acacias.
¹⁹ But Egypt will be desolate,
 Edom a desert waste,
 because of violence done to the people of Judah,
 in whose land they shed innocent blood.
²⁰ Judah will be inhabited forever
 and Jerusalem through all generations.
²¹ Shall I leave their innocent blood unavenged?
 No, I will not.”
 The LORD dwells in Zion!

As we saw in Isaiah and Psalms above, we see here in Joel a prophecy that God’s coming as Judge of all the earth will result in a confrontation with rebellious nations who gather together to attack the people of God. Joel prophesies that the whole creation will be shaken (vv. 15-16, recalling Isa. 24:23) and will be transformed into wondrous fruitfulness (vv. 18-19), recalling the divine intervention and new creation oracle of Isaiah 64–66. The permanence of God’s coming regime (vv. 17, 20) also ties it to the other prophecies we have seen and makes clear that a radical transition to a new age is in view.

Mic. 4:1-7

¹ In the last days
 the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established
 as the highest of the mountains;
 it will be exalted above the hills,
 and peoples will stream to it.
² Many nations will come and say,
 “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
 to the temple of the God of Jacob.
 He will teach us his ways,
 so that we may walk in his paths.”
 The law will go out from Zion,
 the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
³ He will judge between many peoples
 and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.
 They will beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks.
 Nation will not take up sword against nation,
 nor will they train for war anymore.
⁴ Everyone will sit under their own vine
 and under their own fig tree,
 and no one will make them afraid,
 for the LORD Almighty has spoken.
⁵ All the nations may walk
 in the name of their gods,
 but we will walk in the name of the LORD
 our God for ever and ever.
⁶ “In that day,” declares the LORD,
 “I will gather the lame;
 I will assemble the exiles
 and those I have brought to grief.
⁷ I will make the lame my remnant,
 those driven away a strong nation.
 The LORD will rule over them in Mount Zion
 from that day and forever.

In vv. 1-3, Micah’s prophecy closely resembles Isa. 2:2-4 above. But this oracle makes it explicit that God’s kingdom will be worldwide (vv. 7-8), and that all the nations will willingly come to learn God’s ways (vv. 1b-2). *All peoples and nations*, not just the faithful of Israel, will live in safety, peace, and justice forever (vv. 3-4). Immediately following this passage in Micah we will see prophecies in which God promises to defeat violent enemies (4:7-13; 5:7-15) and bring forth a messianic Savior whose reign will be “to the ends of the earth” (5:1-5). The theme of cosmic upheaval that we’ve seen in Psalms and Isaiah is not present.

Zeph. 1:14-18

² “I will sweep away everything
 from the face of the earth,”
 declares the LORD.
³ “I will sweep away both man and beast;
 I will sweep away the birds in the sky
 and the fish in the sea—
 and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble.”
 “When I destroy all mankind
 on the face of the earth,”
 declares the LORD...
¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath—

a day of distress and anguish,
 a day of trouble and ruin,
 a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and blackness—
¹⁶ a day of trumpet and battle cry
 against the fortified cities
 and against the corner towers.

...
¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold
 will be able to save them
 on the day of the LORD's wrath."
 In the fire of his jealousy
 the whole earth will be consumed,
 for he will make a sudden end
 of all who live on the earth.

This global trauma¹ really amounts to the end of human civilization, just as we saw in Isa. 24:17-20. But it is not the absolute end of humanity. Those few who are faithful to God from all the nations will live to worship together:

Zeph. 3:9-10

⁹ "Then I will purify the lips of the peoples,
 that all of them may call on the name of the LORD
 and serve him shoulder to shoulder.
¹⁰ From beyond the rivers of Cush²
 my worshipers, my scattered people,
 will bring me offerings.

This passage contains one of the most wonderful promises in all of OT prophetic literature. It envisions the full acceptance and reconciliation of the Gentile nations, recalling Isa. 66:18-21.

What We Have Learned from OT Passages That Look Ahead to a Changing of the Ages

We have looked at a number of the key passages in the OT that envision a future world-transition that leads to God's will and God's righteousness reigning on the

¹ Sometimes when we read the word "the earth" or "the whole earth" in a prophecy like this, it is to be understood as "the land" or "the whole land," namely the land of Israel or Judah. Context has to decide, because the same Hebrew word, *eretz* (Strong's #H776) can mean either *land* or *earth*. In this prophecy, the coming "day of distress" is clearly global, taking in not only Judah, but its neighboring countries and even faraway places like Assyria and Cush (see Zeph. 2).

² Translators' note: That is, the upper Nile region.

earth. This transition is without exception pictured as a sudden and dramatic intervention by God as the Judge and Ruler of creation, *and not* as a gradual conversion of the world to God's ways. Often the natural environment itself is seen as experiencing upheaval and transformation in this crisis.¹ Some prophecies reveal that there will be intense persecution of the faithful in the time that leads up to God's intervention.² Very often, related to this, we see the rebellious, the violent, and the oppressors gather together to oppose God's coming, and we see them utterly defeated.³ In this context we sometimes see expressed promises of a Davidic Messiah, and in two places we find the promise of resurrection to unending life.⁴ Within the variety that we see, there are three things that are constant: (1) the great coming "Judgment" is seen as a divine intervention into human affairs on earth, *not as something imagined to happen after the end of history*; (2) it is viewed in corporate rather than individual terms; and (3) its purpose is to protect the holy and the innocent from attack by enemies who are stronger than they are.

What do we learn from all of this about how the Bible conveys revelation concerning the future? We learn that the Spirit, who gave all these prophetic visions of the future, did not choose to reveal all aspects of the great coming judgment/transformation at one time, nor did the Spirit choose to reveal every aspect to every person who was given revelation. Each author received some pieces of a larger picture puzzle that would someday appear when their writings ("the Scriptures") would be collected together as "the books of the Bible," the definitive library of revelation from God. What's the point of this observation? The point is this. The pictures we have seen are the pictures that Jesus and the apostles of the NT expected at least their Jewish hearers and readers to be familiar with. Jewish people heard all these inspired passages read in their synagogues. The passages thus provide a crucial backdrop and context for the NT teachings and revelations about the future. The NT pictures, with few exceptions, are pretty much *directly based on the OT pictures*. Without understanding the context-forming role of these OT pictures, it very easy to misunderstand pictures of the future portrayed in the NT.

For example, most Christian readers of the Bible, who share the vague popular conception of hell, imagine judgment and final punishment as things that happen after this life—and indeed all of history—is over. People picture something like an enormous trial held in a black void. After each person's life history is flashed up on a great screen for all to behold, they either get a positive verdict and enter everlasting life, or they get a negative verdict and go off to everlasting fiery torment. This

¹ See Ps. 46:2-3; 97:3-5; Isa. 24:1, 3-6, 18b-20, 23; 64:1-2; 65:17; Ezek. 38:19-20, 22; Joel 3:15-16.

² Isa. 24:16; 25:4-5; 26:16-18; Dan. 7:21, 25; 12:1(?), 7; Zeph. 3:15, 18.

³ Ps. 2:9-11; 46: 6, 8-9; 97:3; Isa. 2:10; 11:4; 24:21-22; 65:12-15; 66:6, 16; Ezek. 38:21-39:21; Dan. 2:44-45; 7:11, 26; Joel 3:9-14; Mic. 4:11-13; 5:7-15; Zeph. 1:2-3, 14-18; 3:6, 8.

⁴ Isa. 26:19 (if read in context of Isa. 25:8); Dan. 12:2-3, 13.

conception is as fundamentally individualistic as it is otherworldly. It has almost nothing to do with the great OT pictures of God’s coming as Judge—which always, even in the case of Daniel 7, portray the judicial intervention of God *on the earthly and political/social plane*. In other words, the Judgment in the OT is the furthest thing from otherworldly, and it’s the furthest thing from individualistic. By the time we are done, I am going to have proven that the NT is much, much more closely aligned with the OT on this question than the great majority of Christians realize. And this proof is going to turn out to be completely relevant to the question of how we are supposed to understand the *exactly two* NT portrayals of “everlasting torment” (Rev. 14:11; 20:10). So stay with me. No matter what you ultimately make of the biblical evidence I am putting before you, I am confident that you will learn a great deal about the Bible’s portrayals of judgment and the future of the world.

The Changing of the Ages in the New Testament

Let’s now turn to see how Jesus and the writers of the NT talk about and picture the idea of coming judgment and the changing of the ages. Before we do that, you can examine this list of key themes we’ve observed in the OT psalms and prophets, and confirm that all of them are found multiple times in the NT.¹

- God Comes as Judge: Lk. 18:1-8; Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:5; 14:10; Jude 1:14-15; Rev. 11:15-19; 14:7
- God Comes to Reign: Mt. 6:10; Lk. 13:29 || Mt. 8:11 (|| Isa. 24:3; 25:6); Lk. 22:18; 1 Cor. 15:24; Rev. 11:15-19
- Violent and Decisive Confrontation with Enemies: Lk. 19:27; 2 Thess. 1:6-10; Heb. 10:27; Rev. 19:11-21
- Upheaval in Natural World: Mt. 24:7-8, 29 (|| Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7); 24:35; Lk. 21:11, 25-26, 33; 2 Pet. 3:5-12; Rev. 6:12-17 etc.
- Creation is Transformed: Mt. 19:28; Rom. 8:18-23; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1–22:5
- Salvation for the Oppressed: Mt. 5:3-7 || Lk. 6:20-25; Lk. 18:1-8; 2 Thess. 1:5-10; Rev. 20:4-6
- Gentiles Reconciled to God: Mt. 12:18, 21; 28:19-20; Lk. 2:32; Jn 10:16; Acts 11:18; 28:28; multiple instances in Pauline Epistles; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Rev. 7:9-17²
- Zion is Exalted: Mt. 5:35 (contrast, however, Jn 4:21); Rom. 11:26; Gal. 4:25-26; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 3:12; 14:1; 21:1–22:5
- Worldwide Justice: 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:24-27

¹ This list is adapted from *The End of the Unrepentant*, p. 138.

² Most of these passages assume that the reconciliation of the Gentiles is already happening in the current age through the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

- Universal Peace: (not in this age: Mt. 10:34; Lk. 12:51); Rom. 2:10; Eph. 2:11-22; Col. 1:20; Rev. 7:9-17; 21:1-4
- Protection for God's People: 2 Thess. 1:6-10; 1 Pet. 1:5; Rev. 20:7-10
- Messiah Reigns: Mt. 19:28; 25:31; Lk. 1:32; 2:11; Acts 2:30, 36; 2 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 1:8; 8:1; 12:2; Rev. 3:21; 7:17; 11:15
- God's Intimate Presence: Rev. 7:9-17; 21:1-8, 22-23; 22:3-5
- No More Sin: Rom. 8:1-6; 1 Cor. 15:54-57; Heb. 8:8-13; 10:11-22

The Changing of the Ages in the Gospels

Before we look at passages in which Jesus talks about “this age” and “that age” (or “the age to come”), I want to say a few words about the basic context of his ministry as a whole. First, think of John the Baptizer, who announced Jesus to the people of Israel. John's understanding of his own ministry was twofold. He was to warn the people of God's soon arrival as Judge and King, and he was to announce the Messiah, whom he believed God would identify to him (Jn 1:29-34). Just as in many of the OT passages we have just read, John believed that Messiah would be God's agent in judging the world and accomplishing the transition to an entirely new age. Let's hear him explain.

Mt. 3:1-3 (paralleled by Mk 1:2-3; Lk. 3:4-6; Jn 1:23)

John would say, ²“Change your hearts!¹ Heaven's Reign² is nearly here!”³
³John is the one Isaiah the prophet was talking about when he said,

There is a sound of someone shouting in the wilderness:
 “Get the Lord's path ready! Straighten up his pathways!”⁴

Lk. 3:7-9, 15-17 (paralleled by Mt. 3:7-12)

⁷Now, John used to say to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You offspring of poisonous snakes, who warned you to run from God's wrath that's about to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of a change of heart. And don't start saying to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ ⁹Because I'm telling you: God can raise up children for Abraham out of these stones! And the ax is already laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that doesn't bear good fruit is going to be chopped down and thrown in the fire.” ...

¹⁵And the people were expectant—and everybody was wondering in their hearts about John: could he possibly be the Messiah? ¹⁶John answered by

¹ Traditionally: “repent.” This word is not about feeling bad about what you've done, but about changing your attitude in a way that results in different behavior.

² Lit. “the kingdom of the heavens.”

³ Lit. “has come near.”

⁴ Lit. “Straighten out his paths.” Isa. 40:3.

telling all of them, “I’m baptizing you with water, but somebody more powerful than me is coming. I’m not even worthy to untie the laces of his sandals. He is the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.¹⁷ His winnowing fan is in his hand, and he’ll clean his threshing floor well, so that he can collect his wheat for storage. But he’ll burn the chaff with fire that can’t be put out.”

As you can see, John believes he has been sent to announce the imminent arrival of God as King and Judge of all humanity. John looks ahead to the great moment of transition that the OT prophets foretold as he baptizes people in the wilderness. Like the prophets before him, he warns that no unrepentant person is going to live through the complete transformation to God’s reign—his message resonates particularly closely with Isaiah 2. He proclaims that all humanity, including the people of Israel, will be sorted into the faithful (“the wheat”) and the unrepentant (“the chaff”) in the coming judgment. As we saw in “The Simple Ones” above, “fire that can’t be put out” (Lk. 3:17) means a fire that you can’t suppress once God sends it: when the fire starts, there will be no calling it off—it will destroy you. “So repent now!” says John.

Like Isaiah and Micah, John understands that God will accomplish the total transition to the coming kingdom of justice and peace by means of the Messiah. He understands his own prophetic ministry not only as one of helping the nation to repent in preparation for this great moment of judgment, but also, as I said, as one of identifying the Messiah and pointing him out to Israel. This he does when he baptizes Jesus and sees a vision of the Holy Spirit coming down to rest on him in the form of a dove (Lk. 3:21-22; Jn 1:32).

Shortly after baptizing Jesus, John is arrested by Herod. Sitting in prison alone, he finds himself confused. Why has God not dramatically intervened to judge and transform the world through Jesus, as envisioned by the prophets, if Jesus is truly God’s chosen Messiah? John sends a message to Jesus from prison: “Are you the One who is coming, or are we supposed to be looking for someone else?” (Mt. 11:3). Jesus sends him a cryptic reply:

Mt. 11:5-6

Blind people are seeing again, and people who are unable to walk are walking.
Lepers are getting cleansed, the dead are being raised, and poor folks are getting good news. And it’s a blessed person who doesn’t get offended by me.

The implication of this message is that yes, Jesus is the Messiah, but like John, his activity contains a phase of preaching the good news and preparing the world for God’s coming in glory as Judge and King. The moment of radical intervention and transformation foreseen by the psalmists and the prophets is not yet ripe. Not only is the Messiah destined to suffer to accomplish the forgiveness of the sins of the world

and to pour forth the Holy Spirit of reconciliation and new life,¹ but those who follow him, who “believe in his message” (Isa. 53:1), will also, like him, bear witness—throughout the world (Isa. 52:7-15). And they too are destined to suffer rejection and deadly persecution before the “end,” the great intervention of God and Jesus’ coming in glory:

Mt. 24:3-14, 21-22

When Jesus sat down at the Mount of Olives, his followers came up to him privately. They said, “Tell us, when will these things happen? Also, what’s the sign² of your coming,³ and of the wrapping up of the age?”⁴ Jesus answered them, “Make sure nobody fools you.⁴ ⁵Because lots of people are going to come using my name. They’re going to be saying, “I’m the Messiah!” Lots of people will be fooled by them. ⁶And you’re going to be hearing of wars and rumors about wars. Make sure you don’t panic. Because it has to happen, but it’s definitely not the end yet.

⁷For example, one nation is going to get up and make war against another nation,⁵ and one kingdom against another kingdom. And there are going to be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸All of these are the start of the labor pains.

⁹At that time people are going to betray you, and you’ll be persecuted. People are going to kill you, and you’re going to be hated in⁶ every nation because of my name. ¹⁰At that time lots of people are going to get tripped up, and they’re going to betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹Lots of false prophets are going to get up and fool most people.⁷ ¹²And because of the increase in lawlessness, most people’s love will go cold. ¹³But the person who holds out to the end will be saved. ¹⁴And this good news of God’s Reign⁸ is going to be preached throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations. Then the end will come. ...

¹ Isa. 53:1-12; 55:13; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-29; Joel 2:28-29; Zech. 12:10–13:1.

² Jews believed there would be certain striking events (“signs”) that would give the clue that God was about to intervene to put an end to human history and renew the world through the Messiah.

³ In the present context, the Greek word here means more than just “coming,” “appearance,” or “arrival.” It can often mean the official arrival of a king or emperor. Since Matthew represents Jesus’ followers as associating his arrival with the end of the age, it is clear that we are to understand that they see him as the hoped-for Messiah, who just hasn’t gone public yet. It means here, “your coming as Messiah.”

⁴ Lit. “leads you astray.” The “you” here and in all instances in Mt. 24 is plural.

⁵ Lit. “nation will rise up against nation.”

⁶ Lit. “by.”

⁷ Or “a lot of people.”

⁸ Traditionally: “the kingdom.”

²¹Because at that time there will be terrible trouble—unlike anything that has ever happened before, or could ever happen again!¹ ²²If that time weren't cut short, not one living soul would be saved.² But for the sake of God's chosen ones, that time will be cut short.

When Jesus talks about “the end” in v. 14, he refers to *the end of the age*. He's referring back to the original question that he's been asked in v. 3 about “the wrapping up of the age” (for this terminology, see also Mt. 13:39, 49). This prophecy (also recorded in Mark 13) clearly references both the “horror that causes abandonment”³ of Dan. 9:27 and the nearly successful war of extermination against the faithful prophesied in Dan. 7:21, 25; 12:7. From these two facts we can see that Jesus looks upon the time period that includes his and his followers' ministry of preaching, service, and reconciliation on earth as being brought to an end by “his coming” in glory as Messiah (v. 3; see also vv. 27-51). This coming is recognizable as the moment of God's instalment of his chosen Messiah as King of Humanity in the psalms and prophets of the OT, and it also clearly maps onto the great intervention of God as Judge and King that the psalmists and the prophets foresee.

This means that “the current age,” including the time between the two comings of Jesus, must be understood as a hybrid age. In the OT God is understood to be present in all creation and to be King of all creation, and yet it is also understood that he will someday fully assert his kingship on earth and manifest his presence intimately and fully. In the same way, Jesus reigns as Messiah now and even “fills all things” now (Eph. 4:10). Once crucified, he has been resurrected and “exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:31-36), and he, along with his Father, will someday manifest his presence intimately and fully on earth. Jesus is Messiah now, and possesses all authority in heaven and on earth now (Mt. 28:18; Acts 2:36), but he will fully express that authority in the future, at the crisis that signals the transition from this age to the age to come:

Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43 (The Parable of the Darnel Weeds/Tares)

²⁴Jesus gave them⁴ another parable and said, “Heaven's Reign is like a man who planted good-quality seed in his field. ²⁵But while people were sleeping, his enemy came, scattered darnel weeds⁵ in amongst the wheat, and went away. ²⁶When the plants grew up and bore fruit, then the darnel weeds showed up. ²⁷And the servants of the head of the house came up and said to him, ‘Sir, didn't you plant good-quality seed in your field? So how come it has darnel

¹ Dan. 12:1; Joel 2:2.

² Lit. “if those days weren't cut short, all flesh wouldn't be saved.”

³ Traditionally, “the abomination of desolation,” Mt. 24:15 || Mk 13:14.

⁴ Lit. “set before them.”

⁵ Darnel looks like wheat until it is full grown. It is actually poisonous.

weeds?’²⁸ He said to them, ‘Some enemy of mine¹ did this.’ And the servants said to him, ‘So, do you want us to go out and gather up the darnel weeds?’²⁹ But he said, ‘No, otherwise in gathering up the darnel weeds, you’ll uproot the wheat with them.³⁰ Leave both to grow together until the harvest. At harvest time I’ll say to the harvesters, “First gather up the darnel weeds and tie them in bundles to be burnt. Then² gather up the wheat into my bins.”’

...

³⁶ Then Jesus left the crowds and went back to the house. His followers came up to him and said, “Explain the parable of the darnel weeds in the field to us.”³⁷ He answered: “The one who plants the good-quality seed is the Human One,³³⁸ and the field is the world. The good-quality seed is those who belong to God’s Reign.⁴ The darnel weeds are those who belong to the Evil One.⁵³⁹ The enemy that scattered them is the devil. The harvest is the wrapping up of the age, and the harvesters are angels.⁴⁰ So, just as darnel weeds are gathered up and burned, the same will happen at the wrapping up of the age.⁴¹ The Human One will send out his angels, and they’ll separate out of his Realm all the people who trip people up, and those who go around acting lawless.⁴² They’ll throw them in the burning furnace. In there there’s going to be people crying and grinding their teeth.⁴³ Then the people of integrity⁶ are going to shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.⁷ If anyone has ears, let them hear!”

This current age of human history, though characterized by God’s patience with human beings (2 Pet. 3:9), is far more than simply an age of waiting on the part of the faithful on earth. Jesus and the writers of the NT teach that this age is an age of witness and reconciliation, in which many key prophetic promises of the coming glorious reign of God are drawn into the present through him. Jesus accomplishes, “in the now,” the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit,⁸ the making of a new covenant,⁹ and the hoped-for reconciliation of the Gentiles.¹⁰ He even brings forth

¹ Lit. “An enemy person.”

² Lit. “But.”

³ Traditionally, “the Son of Man.”

⁴ Lit. “the children of the kingdom.” It’s a figure of speech.

⁵ Lit. “the children of the Evil One.”

⁶ Traditionally: “the righteous.”

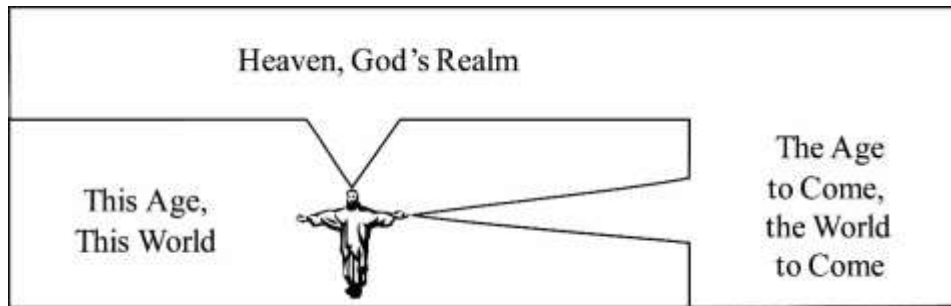
⁷ See Dan. 12:3.

⁸ Mt. 3:11 || Mk 1:8 || Lk. 3:16; Lk. 24:49; Jn 1:33; 3:5; 7:37-39; 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 20:22; Acts 1:1-8; 2:1-21, 33, 38; Rom. 8:1-17; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:13-14; Tit. 3:4-6.

⁹ Mt. 26:28 || Mk 14:24 || Lk. 22:20 || 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 6:8-13; 10:1-22; 12:24.

¹⁰ Mt. 8:11; Lk. 13:29; Jn 10:16 (looking to the future moment of intervention and transformation); but see, clearly in the current age, Mt. 28:18-20; Acts 10:1-11:18; Eph. 2; 1 Pet. 1:3-2:12, etc.

the firstfruits of the resurrection of the dead.¹ In a very real sense, Jesus, *in himself*, accomplishes the piercing into this age of the promised intimate presence of God and the promised blessings of the age to come. As the drawing below illustrates, where Jesus is, God is; where Jesus is, the glories of the age to come pierce into the present age.²



Let's now examine some typical NT passages that explicitly refer to “this age” and the age or ages to come.

Mt. 12:32

But if someone says something against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven them—neither in this age nor in the age to come.

Mk 10:29-30 || Lk. 18:30

²⁹Jesus was saying, “I’m telling you seriously: there’s no one who has left a home, or brothers or sisters, or mother or father, or a child, or properties for me and the good news, ³⁰who won’t receive a hundred times as much now in this age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and properties—with persecutions. And in the age that’s coming, eternal life.

This saying shows that Jesus expected the blessing of “eternal life”—which can either be gained by resurrection or by being found approved as a living person at the judgment to come—to be given to the faithful when the coming age dawns. That may seem obvious to a Christian reader, but it would not necessarily have been clear in the minds of those listening to Jesus. The Sadducees, for example, did not believe in resurrection at all. And the Pharisees and other believers in resurrection did not have a single agreed concept of when resurrection would occur. For example, some influential Jewish books circulating around the time of Jesus only expect

¹ Jesus himself rises, signaling the end of the reign of death which had ruled from the very first generation of human beings (Rom. 5:6-21; 1 Cor. 15:20-24; Heb. 2:9-15). He also raises a number of people from the dead: Mt. 9:18-26 || Mk 5:22-43 || Lk. 8:40-56; Lk. 7:11-17; Jn 11; see also Mt. 27:50-53.

² See *The End of the Unrepentant*, p. 140 for the illustration and for more discussion of this concept, which is known among Bible scholars as “realized eschatology.”

resurrection to occur after the end of the coming messianic age.¹ Jesus is here standing with Daniel 12 and Isaiah 26, which picture resurrection in the context of the crisis-point that ends this age.

Lk. 20:34-36

³⁴And Jesus said to them, “The people² of this age marry and get married.
³⁵But those who’ve been considered worthy to take part in³ that age, and in the resurrection from among the dead—they don’t marry, and they don’t get married. And they can’t die anymore. ³⁶Because they’re like angels, and they’re God’s children. They belong to the resurrection.⁴

This is the clearest of Jesus’ teachings about the relationship between this age and the age to come. The current age (“this age”) is the age of history and human mortality. The age to come (which he calls “that age”) is the age of resurrection and immortality and the coming-of-age of God’s human children. Thanks to the immortality of the participants, in that age procreation (which he implicitly refers to when he speaks of marriage) will be obsolete.

The Changing of the Ages in the NT Epistles and Revelation

Rom. 16:27

To the One Wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory throughout the ages!⁵
Amen.

When Paul wants to evoke the idea of a future time extended without end, he expresses himself in terms of an indefinitely extended string of future ages, just as Daniel does (Dan. 7:18; 12:3). Readers of the Bible in English would unfortunately never have any way of knowing that this is how Paul (along with all the other writers of Scripture) conceive of the future. That’s because practically all translations render expressions like “throughout the ages” (Greek *eis tous aiōnas*) as “forever,” and expressions like “throughout the ages of the ages” (Greek *eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*) as “forever and ever.” The Greek language has a number of words and expressions for infinite duration that correspond to the abstract ideas of “forever,” “eternity,” and “eternal,”⁶ but they are only very rarely used in the Bible, and they are never used to

¹ See, e.g., 4 Ezra 7:26-43; 8:52-54; *Apocalypse of Baruch* (= 2 Baruch) 29-30; *Life of Adam and Eve* 29:7-10; 48:1-3; 51:1-2.

² Lit. “children.”

³ “To take part in”: lit. “to reach,” or “to attain.”

⁴ Lit. “...God’s children, being children of the resurrection.”

⁵ Some very early mss have, “throughout the ages of the ages.”

⁶ I think, for example, of *anēnytōs*, “unending,” *aīdios*, “eternal,” *aei*, “always/forever,” *aie cronon*, “forever time,” *eisaei*, “forever,” *ho sympantos aiōn*, “the all-encompassing age.” None of these abstract Greek words and expressions are used in the Bible to talk about the unending future that God has prepared for the faithful.

speak about the infinitely extended future. That's because the idea of a single future age that is everlasting *is not native to the thought world of the biblical writers*. This fact is significant. If we want to understand what Bible writers are talking about, we cannot simply lean on the unbiblical concepts that our English Bibles convey through their consistent mistranslations. Later we will see how these mistranslations get interpreters in trouble in some key passages that allegedly teach a hell of everlasting torment.

1 Cor. 2:6-8

...we're talking about God's secret, hidden wisdom. It's the wisdom that God had already decided on before all the ages,¹ for our glory. ⁸It's the wisdom that none of this age's rulers knew about. After all, if they had known it, they wouldn't have hung the Lord of Glory² on a cross.

Paul, like writers of the OT, imagines the world of creation as having ages past, a current age, and an unending sequence of future ages.³

Gal. 1:4

³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
⁴He gave himself for our sins, so that he could rescue us out of this current evil age.

The way God is going to rescue us from this evil age is by bringing this age to an end and inviting us into the good and God-filled age to come.

Heb. 6:2

⁴Now, suppose people have already been enlightened: they've tasted the heavenly gift; they've shared in the Holy Spirit; ⁵and they've tasted God's good word, and the powers of the coming age.

The author calls manifestations of the power of the Holy Spirit "powers of the coming age," because the OT prophets picture the universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit as one of the key blessings of the new age that will dawn when God comes in glory to judge and reign.⁴ As we saw above, Jesus has brought this blessing into the present age for those who respond in faith to the message of reconciliation that he brings.

¹ More literally, "that God foreordained before the ages."

² For background to this title, see e.g. Ps. 24:8.

³ Ps. 77:6 and Eccl. 1:10 in the original Hebrew and in the Greek of the LXX, refer to ages past, but translators, in a way similar to the way in which they mask references to future ages in both testaments, typically make this invisible by using non-literal phrases like "long ago" in their translations. For another NT example of the idea of past ages, see 1 Cor. 10:11, where Paul says that believers are those "upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

⁴ See Isa. 44:3; 59:21; Ezek. 37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:28-29; Zech. 12:10.

Heb. 9:26

But now he [Christ] has appeared once, at the wrapping up of the ages.

The world has developed through a sequence of ages since the creation, but now the whole sequence is coming to an end, and a new world, and a radically new age, is coming.

Jude 25

To the One God our savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, greatness, power, and authority—before every age, and now, and throughout all the ages. Amen.

Jude sees the world in terms of a plurality of past ages, this age, and a plurality of future ages. The NIV, locked in by the strong convention among English Bible translations, ends up rendering the verse inconsistently: "...before all ages, now and forevermore." There is no such word in Greek as "forevermore."

Rev. 11:15-18

¹⁵The seventh angel blew his trumpet. And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of this world now belongs to our Lord and to his Christ! He's *going to reign throughout the ages of the ages!*"¹

¹⁶And the twenty-four ancient ones, who are sitting on their thrones in front of God, fell on their faces and worshiped God. They were ¹⁷saying, We thank you, Sovereign, All Powerful God, Who is and who was,² Because you've taken your great power and have begun to rule.

¹⁸The nations were angry, And your anger came, And the time came to judge the dead, And to give rewards to your servants the prophets, And to the holy ones, And to those who revere your name, the weak and the powerful,³ And to destroy those who are destroying the earth.

The voices in heaven (v. 15) are celebrating the arrival of the great royal judgment event that Daniel saw and narrated in Daniel 7, which resulted in the destruction of the intensely destructive "fourth beast" and in the vindication of the holy ones. According to the Court's verdict, they were given authority to rule on the earth "for the age, and for an age of ages" (Dan. 7:18). John records even stronger language

¹ Greek *basileusei eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*.

² Lit. "the Is and the Was." See Rev. 1:8; 4:8.

³ Lit. "the small and the great."

than that in Revelation 22, which matches word for word what is affirmed of God's and Christ's reign above in Rev. 11:15:

Rev. 22:3-5

There will no longer be any kind of curse. And the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it [the New Jerusalem], and his servants will serve him, and they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night. They won't even need the light of a lamp or of the sun, because the Lord God will shine on them. And they're *going to reign for the ages of the ages*.¹

What We've Learned in This Chapter

We've learned that both testaments of the Bible foresee a dramatic transition from the current age of sin and mortality to a glorious age of renewal, in which God's kingdom of life and righteousness will fill the earth. We've seen that very many passages in the Bible look forward not just to one single future age, but to an indefinitely extended sequence of coming ages (e.g. Dan. 7:18; Rom. 16:27; Jude 25; Rev. 11:15; 22:5). We've also seen Jesus teaching that the age to come will be an age of resurrection for some ("those found worthy of taking part in that age"), but not for all (Lk. 20:34-36). In Chapters 3 and 4 we'll turn to look at the relationship between resurrection and judgment on the one hand, and the coming age or ages, on the other hand. Once we have gotten clear about this relationship, we will be in a position to understand all of the passages in the New Testament that speak about the ultimate fate of the unrepentant.

¹ Greek *basileusousin* [plural of *basileusei*] *eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*.

Chapter 3

Resurrection, Judgment, and the Changing of the Ages in the NT Gospels and Epistles

The question of the relationship between resurrection and judgment in the NT involves some complexity, and a huge amount could be written on it. However, as I have promised, I'm going to keep things relatively short in this book.¹ Let's start with the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels, and then go on to look at other parts of the NT.

Resurrection, Judgment, and the Age to Come in the Synoptic Gospels²

Lk. 14:14

...[W]hen you have a party,³ invite poor people, people with disabilities, people that can't walk, blind people. ¹⁴Then⁴ you'll be blessed, because they don't have a way to pay you back, and⁵ you'll be paid back in the resurrection of the just.

The expression “the resurrection of the just” naturally suggests the idea of two distinct resurrections—one for the just, and one for the unjust. It doesn't *prove* that idea in and of itself, but it does fit better with it than with the idea of a single, universal resurrection. This saying also teaches that the “resurrection of the just” is the time for being rewarded for the (good) things that you have done in this life. In other words, “the resurrection of the just” is associated with a future judgment of human beings. We saw in the previous chapter that both the OT and the NT look ahead to the transition between this age and the coming age of God's Reign as the time when God will judge all of humanity. In this passage, Jesus assures the faithful who serve the poor that they will receive a reward from God in the future even if they die before God's Reign comes. Does this imply that the judgment of all the dead, the resurrection of the just, and the coming of the new age of God's Reign

¹ For a treatment that will supplement this one, see Chapter 6 in *The End of the Unrepentant*.

² Matthew, Mark, and Luke are commonly referred to as “the Synoptic Gospels” or simply “the Synoptics,” because they have so much common material.

³ Lit. “make a reception.”

⁴ Lit. “And.”

⁵ Lit. “for.”

happen at the same time? Another passage from the teaching of Jesus helps answer this question:

Lk. 20:34-36 (|| Mt. 22:30 || Mk 12:25)

³⁴And Jesus said to them, “The people¹ of this age marry and get married.
³⁵But those who’ve been considered worthy to take part in² that age, and in the resurrection from among the dead—they don’t marry, and they don’t get married. And they can’t die anymore. ³⁶Because they’re like angels, and they’re God’s children. They belong to the resurrection.³

Jesus is here responding to a trick question about resurrection that has been posed to him by the Sadducees.⁴ His answer is to say that marriage is for this age, not for the age to come. It is clear that when Jesus uses the expression “the resurrection” (Mt. 22:30 || Lk. 20:36) by itself, he refers to *the resurrection of the just*. After all, no Jew, Jesus included, would ever have said that *the resurrected unrepentant* would be “like angels in heaven.” Nor would Jesus ever have said that they would be invulnerable to death, or that they would be “God’s children,” as in Luke’s version. Luke’s version of this saying is actually very instructive, because it makes an equivalency between being found worthy in the coming judgment to participate in the age to come, on the one hand, and “resurrection from among the dead,” on the other hand. Let’s look more closely at it:

Lk. 20:35

³⁵But those who’ve been considered worthy to take part in⁵ that age, and in the resurrection from among the dead—they don’t marry...

“That age” obviously means the age to come, the age of God’s Reign on earth, which is destined to follow immediately after this current age of history. What is ultimately going to happen to those who are found *unworthy* of eternal life at the moment when God’s Reign comes? Jesus doesn’t say a word about what ultimately happens to such people in this saying, for the simple reason the conversation isn’t about them. It’s about the resurrection of the faithful. But Jesus clearly indicates what *does not happen* to the unworthy ones when the faithful are resurrected to participate in the age to come. When Jesus speaks of a “resurrection from among the dead” (Gr. *anastasis ek nekrōn*),⁶ he is affirming about the rest of the dead *that they remain*

¹ Lit. “children.”

² “To take part in”: lit. “to reach,” or “to attain.”

³ Lit. “...God’s children, being children of the resurrection.”

⁴ The Sadducees didn’t believe in any kind of afterlife. For the whole exchange, see Mt. 22:22-30; Mk 12:18-27; Lk. 20:27-40.

⁵ “To take part in”: lit. “to reach,” or “to attain.”

⁶ The Greek words here are *anastasis* (“resurrection,” Strong’s #G386; see also the verb *anistēmi*, “rise,” #G450), *ek* (“from,” Strong’s #G1537), and *nekros* (“corpse,” “dead,” Strong’s #G3498).

dead. They are *not* found worthy of being resurrected, but remain imprisoned in the underworld realm of the dead. They are like prisoners who have been held in custody before and during their trial—but who now, after trial, conviction, and sentencing, must serve out their prison sentence.

It's absolutely crucial to understand here that the familiar NT phrase "resurrection from the dead" (as in most English translations) does *not* mean "resurrection from a state of death," as most people assume. The Greek word *nekros* (dead) in the expression "from the dead" is a substantive adjective. That means it functions as a noun in a sentence, as in the example, "The *humble* will inherit the earth." It is also *plural* here, thus it means *the dead people*. In other words, when Jesus talks about a resurrection "from the dead," he is unmistakably talking about a resurrection from among those who are dead—a resurrection that brings some of the dead to life, but leaves the rest of the dead people *dead*. You simply can't have a resurrection "from among the dead" if everyone is being raised at the same time.

It's easy to see how people get confused about this. After all, (1) Jesus and the writers of the NT clearly agree that when Jesus comes again there will be a universal *judgment* of every person who has ever lived, and (2) at least three NT passages affirm that resurrection is the eventual fate of all human beings—whether they are destined for everlasting life or not (Jn 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; Rev. 20:4-6; 13-15). Nevertheless, the idea that everyone is going to be *judged at once* does not mean that everyone is going to be *resurrected at once*. In fact, the words of Jesus in Lk. 20:35 clearly suggest the idea of people being *selected out* as worthy of resurrection, at a universal judgment.

When does this determination, this judgment, happen? The first thing to note is that neither Jesus nor any of the NT authors ever picture people facing the court of God's judgment immediately when they die. Instead, they look ahead to a universal judgment that is going to occur at the moment of transition between this age and the coming age of God's and Christ's glorious reign. Jesus often characterizes this as "the day of judgment," "the judgment," or sometimes just "that day." The following passages give us some samples of his thinking:

Mt. 7:21-23

²¹Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord!" will get into Heaven's Reign. No, it will only be the person who actually does the will my Father in heaven.

²²Lots of people are going to say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we kick out demons in your name too? And didn't we even do lots of displays of power in your name?" ²³Then I will say right out loud to them, "I have never known you! Stay away from me, all of you who practice lawlessness!"

It's obvious that "that day" (v. 22) is the future day when Heaven's (i.e. God's) Reign comes to its full and glorious earthly manifestation. On that day, when Jesus comes in glory to reign as God's chosen Messiah, people will address him as "Lord," hoping to receive his invitation to "enter," which is to say, *participate as citizens in*, his glorious kingdom. He will act as Judge, and he will decide who has lived in a way that is worthy of being invited in. Profession of belief in him as Messiah (calling him "Lord") will not be enough.

Mt. 16:25-27

²⁵Whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life because of me will find it. ²⁶After all, what good is it for a person if they gain the whole world, but their life is a loss?¹ In other words, what can a person give in exchange for their life? ²⁷Because the Human One is going to come with the glory of his Father, along with his angels. And then he will reward each person in line with their actions.

In this saying, Jesus makes it clear that you can lose your life—that is, you can die in this present age of mortal life—and still make it alive into the glorious reign of Jesus as Messiah. It is also clear that the moment of his handing out of "rewards" to all people—resulting in their gaining or losing their (eternal) lives—will be when he comes "with the glory of his Father" (v. 27). As we saw above, Jesus Christ's glorious reign and God's glorious reign are one and the same (e.g. Ps. 2; Rev. 11:15).

Mt. 19:28-30

I'm telling you seriously: there's going to be a new creation, when the Human One sits on his glorious throne. At that time you who've followed me are going to sit on twelve thrones too.² You'll be judges for the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹And as for everyone who has left a home, or brothers or sisters, or father or mother, or children, or properties, because of my name—they'll receive back a hundred times what they gave up, and they'll inherit eternal life. ³⁰But a lot of those who are first are going to be last, and a lot of those who are last are going to be first.

Jesus teaches that there is a *new creation* coming, a moment when the world will be *made new* (v. 28).³ At that moment of complete world-transformation, Jesus will take his place as King and Judge of all. He will compensate all those who made sacrifices for him with the immortal life of the age to come (v. 29). Not everyone

¹ Lit. "their life is lost," but this is a business metaphor, in terms of profit and loss. On the profit side of the ledger, you've acquired the entire planet, but your life itself is on the loss side. What have you gained?

² Lit. "Amen I say to you that you who've followed me, in the renewal [of the world], when the Human One [traditionally: "the Son of Man"] sits on his glorious throne, you too will sit on twelve thrones."

³ The Greek word here is *palingenesia* (Strong's #G3824), literally a re-genesis.

will be pleased with the results of this great judgment. Many of those used to being “first,” which is to say, first in honor and position and power in this age, will find themselves “last,” in the place of dishonor, exclusion, and powerlessness. And many of those in the “last” place of this age—those dishonored, excluded, disenfranchised, and persecuted for their faith in Jesus—will be invited into the places of highest honor.

Mt. 25:31-32

³¹When the Human One comes in his glory, all his angels will be with him too. Then he’s going to sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations are going to be assembled there in front of him. He’ll sort them out from one another, just like a shepherd sorts the sheep out from the goats.

These last four passages make it clear that Jesus will function as messianic King and Judge when he comes again in glory. As we saw in the last chapter, there are many passages in the OT in which a Davidic Messiah is a central figure in a vision of the total transformation of the world through the coming of God’s Reign. Jesus and the writers of the NT always embrace this understanding. The promise of eternal life in Mt. 19:29 shows that his authority as Judge extends to granting people entry into his and God’s Reign and to resurrection life. We’ll look closely at the whole Mt. 25:31-46 passage later on. Here are some more examples from the Gospel of Matthew:

Mt. 10:14-15 || Lk. 10:10-12

¹⁴And if anyone doesn’t accept you or listen to your message, leave that house or city behind, and shake the dust off your feet. ¹⁵I’m telling you seriously: it will be more bearable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that city!

Mt. 11:36-37

³⁶I’m telling you, people will give an explanation for every unthinking¹ word they’ve said, on the day of judgment. ³⁷You’ll be justified by your words, and you’ll be condemned by your words.

Mt. 12:41-43

⁴¹The men of Nineveh² are going to stand up and testify against this generation in the judgment, and will condemn it. Because they changed their hearts³ on the basis of Jonah’s preaching. And look, there’s something bigger than Jonah here. ⁴²The Queen of Sheba⁴ will be called to testify against this generation in

¹ Lit. “idle,” “useless.”

² Prn. *ninn-a-va*.

³ Traditionally: “repented.”

⁴ Lit. “the South.” She probably came from the ancient kingdom of Marib in Yemen, 1,800 miles south of Israel.

the judgment, and she'll condemn it. Because she came from the far corners of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And look, there's something bigger than Solomon here.¹

It's clear from these last three examples that Jesus looks ahead to a great day of judgment on which all human beings who have ever lived will give an account of how they conducted themselves in their mortal lives. Even people long dead and people from faraway nations will have to appear in this judgment—and some will fare better than others.

Notice the phraseology that Jesus uses in the last passage, Mt. 12:41-43. He says that “The men of Nineveh are going to stand up and testify against this generation.” In this statement, and the statement about the Queen of Sheba, Jesus is using Hebrew technical terminology for testifying in court. For example, Isaiah prophesies, “you will refute every tongue that accuses you” (Isa. 54:17, NIV). In the original Hebrew, this is literally “you will prove wrong *every tongue that stands up with you.*” Similarly, David says, “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment” (Ps. 1:5). David doesn't mean the wicked will not be there at all in the judgment, or that they will stay sitting down. He means that when they are made to appear in God's Court, they will not be able to justify their behavior. God's verdict will be against them, and they will be found guilty. In another place David says, “Ruthless witnesses come forward [lit. *stand up*]; they question me on things I know nothing about” (Ps. 35:11).² This is all courtroom language. And it's completely natural that Jesus should use this language when he is talking about the great coming judgment. After all, in essence, the judgment is a *trial*, with Jesus Christ as Judge.

I have explained all this because it's a natural—and common—mistake for people who don't know this special legal terminology to think that Jesus is talking about *resurrection* when he talks about the men of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba “standing up” to testify. We already know from elsewhere (especially Lk. 20:35 above) that the coming judgment is going to determine who among the dead is worthy to *be* resurrected to join in “the resurrection of the righteous.” Let's look at one more gospel passage.

Lk. 17:26-30 (|| Mt. 24:37-39)

²⁶Just like it was in Noah's day,³ that's how it's going to be in the Human One's day.⁴ ²⁷They were eating and drinking, marrying and getting married—right up to the day that Noah went into the ark, and the flood came and

¹ Mt 11:20-24 || Lk. 10:13-15;

² For more clear instances of this terminology of “to stand up” (Heb. *quwm*, Strong's #H6965) meaning to testify in court, also see Deut. 19:15-16; Job 16:8 (metaphorical); 20:27; Ps. 94:15-16.

³ Lit. “days.” Gen. 7:6-23.

⁴ Lit. “days.”

destroyed them all. ²⁸It'll also be just like what happened in Lot's day.¹ They were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting their fields, and building their houses. ²⁹But on the day that Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰It'll be like that on the day that the Human One is revealed.²

Jesus here looks ahead to a day when he will be revealed as the “Human One” (traditionally, “the Son of Man”) in the universal, history-stopping, age-changing judgment prophesied in Daniel 7. As we saw in the prophecy of Isaiah 24, Jesus himself prophesies that this age and this world will end with a fiery trauma that none of the unrepentant will survive. We'll spend more time on this theme later.

Judgment, Resurrection, and the Coming Age of God's Reign through Jesus Christ in the NT Epistles

Paul and Peter agree that Jesus is coming again to judge both the living and the dead, on the basis of their conduct in their mortal lives:

1 Cor. 4:4-5

I'm not conscious of anything against myself, but that certainly doesn't mean I'm innocent.³ No, the one who judges me is the Lord. ⁵So you shouldn't be pre-judging things—wait until the Lord comes. Then he'll shine a light on the things hidden in the dark. He's also going to reveal the motivations of people's hearts. And then the praise each person gets will be from God.

2 Cor. 5:10

¹⁰[W]e all have to appear in front of Christ's judgment bench. And each person is going to get paid back for the things they've done while they were in their body, whether good or bad.⁴

2 Tim. 4:1-2

I challenge you in front of God, and in front of Christ Jesus, who's going to judge the living and the dead—and I challenge you by his arrival and his kingdom: ²Preach the message!

¹ Lit. “days.” Gen. 18:20-21; 19:1-29.

² Dan. 7:1-27.

³ Lit. “but I certainly haven't been found innocent because of this.”

⁴ See also Rom. 2:5-16; 14:10; 2 Tim. 4:8.

1 Pet. 4:5

They're going to have to give an account of themselves to the One who's just about to judge the living and the dead.¹

Notice how Paul expresses his own hope of resurrection:

Phil. 3:10-11

¹⁰It's about knowing Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and knowing what it is to share in his sufferings. It's about being molded into the pattern of his death, ¹¹so I can somehow make it² to the resurrection from among the dead.³

As we seen from the previous examples in Paul's letters, Paul believes that there is going to be a judgment of every person who has ever lived when Jesus comes—whether they happen to be alive at that moment or whether they have already died. Paul's hope for his own future is that he will gain “the resurrection from among the dead,”⁴ which naturally implies that he's hoping to take part in a resurrection in which not all of the dead will be privileged to take part. Paul believes that all people who have ever lived—the faithful and unrepentant, the saved and lost—are eventually going to be resurrected (Acts 24:15; see 1 Cor. 15:22). Yet his hope for himself is *not* simply that he will be raised from death as such, because that is going to happen everyone—including those who are destined for destruction. Paul's hope is that he will be found worthy to take part in *the resurrection from among the dead* that happens when Jesus comes again to judge the world and to inaugurate the glorious and immortal age to come (as in Lk. 20:35). Paul's words in 1 Cor. 15:20-24 make perfect sense when read with this understanding:

1 Cor. 15:12, 20-24

¹²But if Christ is being preached as raised from among the dead, how is it that some of you say that there's no resurrection of the dead? ... ²⁰But the fact is, Christ *has* risen from among the dead. He's the first harvest⁵ of those who've passed away. ²¹After all, since death came through a human being, resurrection of the dead also came through a human being. ²²Because just as

¹ See also Acts 10:42.

² Or “...death, if I can somehow make it.”

³ For instances of the phrase “from among the dead” referring to the resurrection of Jesus, see Rom. 1:4; 4:24; 6:4, 9, 13; 7:4; 8:11; 10:7, 9; 11:16; 15:12, 20; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20; 5:14; Col. 1:18; 2:12; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 2:8; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 1:3, 21; Rev. 1:5.

⁴ Greek: *hē exanastasis hē ek nekrōn*. This is actually an even stronger expression of the idea of a selective resurrection than the one Jesus uses in Lk. 20:35. Paul literally speaks of “the out-resurrection [*exanastasis*, Strong's #G1815] from among the dead.”

⁵ Paul's using a metaphor from Jewish worship. A gift was to be given to God from the best of the early summer harvest. That gift would “redeem” the rest of the crop and guarantee God's blessing on it.

in Adam everyone dies, so in Christ everyone will be brought to life—²³but each in their own proper order:¹ Christ the first harvest, then those who belong to him, at his coming, ²⁴then the end. That’s when he hands the kingdom over to God the Father.² It’s when he does away with all rule and authority and power. ²⁵Because he has to rule as king until he completely subdues all his enemies.³ ²⁶The last enemy he’ll overthrow is death...

Paul does not say that all of humanity will be raised when Jesus comes again, but only “those who belong to him” (v. 23). After that comes the “end,” which he does not go on to describe, but only refers to indirectly. I believe Paul is hinting that God’s last saving act will be to destroy not only death itself, but, along with it, all those who persist in living in deathliness. When he talks about “the end” (v. 24), I think Paul is referring to the resurrection and destruction of the unrepentant, who even in resurrection itself stand not for life but against it. I promise to prove this in detail below. Let’s review what we have discovered so far in this and the previous chapter:

- The glorious and long-awaited Reign of God, and with it the transition to a new age of worldwide peace and justice, will come when Jesus comes again in glory as Messiah.
- A universal judgment of all humanity, the living and the dead, will happen when Jesus comes again. He is the Judge appointed by God.
- This universal judgment will decide who among the living is worthy to be invited into the Reign of Christ and God, and who among the dead is worthy to be resurrected to take part in the Reign of Christ and God.

Three important questions arise from these discoveries. 1. Since the age to come is an age of immortal, resurrected life, what happens to those who are faithfully following Jesus on earth when the day of judgment brings this age and this world to an end? 2. What happens to those who are living unrepentant lives on earth when Jesus comes, and who presumably find themselves refused entry into the Reign of Christ and God? 3. What is the ultimate fate of those who are dead when Jesus comes, and who are refused resurrection at the inauguration of the glorious reign of Christ and God? Let’s consider these questions one by one.

1. What Happens to the Faithful Who are Living When Jesus Comes?

Mt. 24:29-31, 35 (|| Mk 13:24-27, 31)

²⁹Right after that time of trouble,
The sun will go dark,

¹ Paul is using the analogy of a military parade. The word “order” implies that each person has their proper place in the formation.

² Lit. “to God, even the Father.”

³ Lit. “until he puts all his enemies under his feet.” See Ps. 8:6.

And the moon won't shine,¹
 The stars will fall out of heaven,
 And the heavenly powers will be shaken.²

³⁰Then the sign of the Human One will appear in heaven. All the families on earth will be crying, when they see³ the Human One coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and intense glory. ³¹And he'll send out his angels with a huge trumpet blast. They'll gather together his chosen ones from the four winds—from one end of the heavens to the other.

³⁵Heaven and earth are going to go away, but my words are never going to go away.

Jesus agrees with the Psalms and the Prophets that the transition between this age and the age of his and his Father's Reign is going to be accompanied by the dissolution of the entire physical world, including heaven and earth (vv. 29, 35). The entire world of unrepentant humanity will be swept away in a moment:

Mt. 24:37-39 (|| Lk 17:26-28)

³⁷So it will be like in Noah's days when the Human One comes. ³⁸Because in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, getting married and making marriage arrangements—right up to the day that Noah went into the ark. ³⁹They didn't recognize what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away.⁴ It'll be the same at the coming of the Human One.

Jesus assures us that those among the living who are faithful to him will be protected in the coming global cataclysm. Just as Noah and his family were gathered into the ark right before the flood hit the ancient world, Christ's angels will pluck his faithful ones up from the four winds of the dissolving earth and gather them all together to safety so that they can enter the new creation with him (Mt. 24:31 || Mk 13:27). The apostle Paul knows of this teaching, which he passes on to the Christian believers in the Macedonian town of Thessalonika:

1 Thess. 4:13-17

¹³Now brothers and sisters, we don't want you to be uninformed about those who've passed away.⁵ We don't want you to grieve, like everybody else who doesn't have hope. ¹⁴Because if we believe that *Jesus* died and rose, then God, *through Jesus*, in the same way, will also bring *with Jesus* those who've passed

¹ Lit. "the moon won't give her light."

² Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31: 3:15; Isa. 34:4; Hag. 2:6, 21.

³ Lit. "and they'll see."

⁴ Lit. "took them all."

⁵ Lit. "And we don't want you to be ignorant about those who are asleep." "Those who are asleep" is a common euphemism for people who've died.

away.¹ ¹⁵And we're telling you this by the Lord's own teaching:² we who are left alive at the Lord's coming *will not* precede those who've passed away.³

¹⁶Because

In the blink of an eye,
With the call of an archangel,
With the trumpet of God,
The Lord himself is going to come down from heaven,
And the dead in Christ are going to rise first.

¹⁷Then we, who've been left alive,
Are going to be snatched away with them into the clouds,
To meet the Lord in the air.

And so from then on we'll always be with the Lord.

We see here that Paul expects the resurrection of the faithful who have died, and the rescue of the faithful who are alive, to happen almost simultaneously. Whereas Jesus simply says that the angels will “gather together his chosen ones” (Mt. 24:31), with the implication that the chosen ones will in some way be united with him as he comes to take up his reign on earth, Paul makes the point explicitly. He states that the reason for the gathering together of the faithful—both the living and those who have died—in the air is so that they can all meet the Lord Jesus as he comes in glory, and so be with him “always” (v. 17). As for the rest of humanity left on earth, Paul knows from the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 24 and Luke 17 that they will be suddenly and swiftly destroyed:

1 Thess. 5:1-3

¹But as for the times and the dates, brothers and sisters, you don't need me to write to you. ²Because you already know very well that the Day of the Lord is coming just like a thief in the night. ³When they're saying, “Peace and security,” suddenly destruction is going to come for them. It'll be like a pregnant woman in labor—and they're not going to get out of it!

Paul's teaching about the faithful who survive until Jesus comes in glory raises a question: What about the fact that the living (mortal) faithful will be gathered together with the resurrected (immortal) faithful? Does that mean that the living faithful will miss out on the blessing of immortal life in the age to come? Paul has an answer for that question too:

¹ Lit. “fallen asleep.”

² See Mt. 24:30-31; Mk 13:26-27.

³ Lit. “fallen asleep.”

1 Cor. 15:50-53

⁵⁰...Flesh and blood can't inherit Heaven's Reign. And what breaks down isn't going to inherit invulnerability to breaking down. ⁵¹Look, I'm going to tell you a secret. We're not all going to pass away. But we'll all be transformed ⁵²in an instant—in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. ¹ Because the trumpet is going to blow—and the dead are going to be raised, invulnerable to breaking down. And we're going to be transformed. ⁵³Because this body, which is vulnerable to breaking down, is going to be clothed with invulnerability to breaking down. And this mortal body of ours is going to be clothed with immortality.

Paul answers our first question clearly and thoroughly. The faithful who are privileged to remain alive until Jesus comes again will be transformed into the immortal form of being that the resurrected enjoy.² The only difference is that the living will be transformed to an immortal state without dying first.

2. What Happens to Those Who are Living Unrepentant Lives on Earth When Jesus Comes?

We already have plenty of information, just from the OT and NT passages we've already seen, to be able to say that unrepentant human beings are not going to survive the total transformation that is coming (e.g. Ps. 97:3-5; Isa. 24:10-13, 17-20; Dan. 2:34-35, 44; Zeph. 1:14-18; Mt. 24:37-39; Lk. 17:26-30). Nonetheless, here are a few more passages that should remove all possible doubt.

Mt. 3:8, 10-12 (the preaching of John the Baptizer)

⁸Bear fruit worthy of a change of heart.³ ... ¹⁰The ax is already laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that doesn't bear good fruit is going to be chopped down and thrown in the fire. ¹¹I'm baptizing you with water for a change of heart.⁴ But the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I am. I'm not even worthy to carry his sandals! He is the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹²His winnowing fan is in his hand, and he'll clean his threshing floor well, and he'll collect his wheat for storage.⁵ But the chaff he'll burn with fire that can't be put out."

John the Baptizer is very clear in prophesying that the Messiah (Jesus) is going to be the Judge who decides who is living in a way that merits their invitation to take

¹ See Mt. 24:31.

² Paul probably alludes to this possibility in 2 Cor. 5:4 also.

³ Traditionally: "worthy of repentance."

⁴ Traditionally: "for repentance."

⁵ The ancient mss have slight variations here. It could also be "the wheat for his stores," or "the wheat into storage."

part God's coming glorious Reign. Those who are not living lives showing the fruit of repentance will be removed and burnt up like a fruitless tree, or like chaff. Neither John nor Jesus (see Mt. 7:21-23 above) suggests the possibility of people being judged as somewhere in the middle between worthy and unworthy, and being consigned to a faraway corner of the Kingdom. There are only two options: people are going to be welcomed into the glorious Kingdom of God and his Messiah on earth, or they are going to be banished from the earth. In a word, the unrepentant are going to perish.

Mt. 7:19

¹⁹Every tree that doesn't bear good fruit is chopped down and thrown in the fire.

The preaching of Jesus here exactly echoes that of John the Baptizer. It's clear he's talking about complete destruction. A fruit tree that turns out not to bear any fruit is cut down and chopped up for firewood.

In Lk. 17:26-30 above, Jesus compares the day of his appearance as Judge both to the Flood of Genesis 6–8 and to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. He couldn't have chosen more pointed examples of judgments in which none but those pleasing to God survived. Jesus even goes on to say, "Remember Lot's wife!" (Lk. 17:32). In other words, it's not even good enough simply to be a member of the group that's being saved: every individual person has a duty to commit themselves to their own salvation process. If someone doesn't follow through on the instructions for how to be saved, they will be lost like everyone else. Paul says something very close to this. He warns Jews—people born into the divinely chosen community—that they are not guaranteed to be awarded eternal life in the coming judgment simply because they are Jews:

Rom. 2:4-10

⁴Don't you know that God's acts of kindness are supposed to lead you to a change of heart? ⁵But suppose your heart is stubborn and unrepentant. Aren't you piling up God's anger towards you for the day when God's anger and just judgment are revealed? ⁶God is going to repay each person in line with their behavior. ⁷For those who consistently do good, and so strive for glory and honor and incorruptible life, there will be eternal life. ⁸But for those who live selfishly, and disobey the truth, while obeying what is unjust, ⁹there will be anger and wrath. Trouble and distress will land on every human soul that does evil—the Jew first, and also the non-Jew. ¹⁰But glory and honor and peace will come to everyone who does good—the Jew first, and also the non-Jew.

Paul's statements here imply that the gift of "eternal life" (v. 7) is the outcome of a positive verdict at the judgment of the living and the dead. Resurrection (or

transformation) to “incorruptible life” (v. 7) is going to be the outcome for some, whereas “anger, wrath, trouble, and distress” (v. 9) will be the outcome for others. I think we can say with confidence that “anger and wrath” don’t leave room for the idea of surviving to take up some kind of second-class, mortal citizenship in the age to come. Paul is capable of being even more pointed. In the following passage, he alludes not only to the words of Jesus in Mt. 24:31, but also to Daniel 7 and Isaiah 2:

2 Thess. 1:7-10

⁷Our relief is going to come at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with his mighty angels. ⁸In flaming fire, he’s going to deal out retribution to those who don’t know God, who don’t respond to the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹They’re the ones who’re going to experience the sentence of eternal destruction “from the presence of the Lord and from his powerful glory,”¹ ¹⁰when he comes to be glorified with his holy ones.

When we looked at the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man above, we saw that Jesus pictures those who die (or at least the unrepentant who die) as going down to the underworld prison of Hades. Since (1) both Jesus and Paul assume that the unrepentant dead will be left in the realm of the dead when they are found unworthy of resurrection for the glorious age to come, and (2) both Jesus and Paul insist that unrepentant living mortals will be found unworthy and removed from the earth when the judgment comes, does that mean that (3) Jesus and Paul both believe that unrepentant living mortals will be consigned to the underworld along with the unrepentant dead who are refused resurrection? I would answer *yes*. It’s true that Paul doesn’t specifically talk in terms of Jesus “sending people to Hades” when he comes in glory. He just refers to the destruction of all the unrepentant at Christ’s coming in glory (1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2:1-12). On the other hand, talk about “destruction” obviously means that people are going to die, and Paul talks in Romans about the underworld abyss as the place where people go when they die:

Rom. 13:6-7

⁶Don’t say in your heart, “Who is going to go up into heaven?” (That is, to bring Christ down.) ⁷And don’t say, “Who is going to go down into the abyss?” (That is, to bring Christ up from among the dead.)

I think it’s reasonable—if not ironclad—to say that Paul expects unrepentant people who live to experience the fiery judgment of the second coming to be consigned to the abyss²/Hades³ along with the unrepentant dead—who themselves will be left there, having been found unworthy of being raised to participate in the glorious age

¹ Lit. “from the glory of his power.” See Isa. 2:10, 19, 21.

² Greek *abyssos*, Strong’s #G12.

³ Greek *hadēs*, Strong’s #G86.

to come. In fact, it would be entirely within the realm of possibility to read Paul's words "the sentence of eternal (*aiōnios*) destruction" in 2 Thess. 1:9 as literally meaning the sentence of age-enduring destruction. Paul is obviously not saying that it will take an age (much less *forever*) for Jesus to destroy (i.e. slay) unrepentant mortals when he comes. So he is either saying (1) that they will be consigned to an age-long state of destruction, their bodies in a dissolved state for the entire age to come, their consciousness miserably imprisoned in Hades like the rich man in the story of Lk. 16:19-31, or (2) that they will be destroyed permanently and irrevocably on the spot. The first of these is a little odd because it requires an extrapolation from the obvious idea that these people will die when confronted with the coming of Jesus. But then again, the second is more than a little odd because you either have to (1) supply—without any textual basis—the assumption that they are judged and killed at Christ's coming in glory, then instantly resurrected, then judged again, and then killed again, this time permanently, or (2) assume that these unrepentant ones do not get a resurrection at all because they don't need one—they have lived to see the great judgment, and they go straight to the condition of final perdition—whatever that is.¹

The simple truth is, Paul's letters don't contain any direct answer to the question of what—if anything—happens to the unrepentant *after* they are destroyed from the earth at the second coming of Jesus. Paul just doesn't talk about it. Jesus, on the other hand, *does* talk about it, and he gives us a clear answer:

Mt. 11:20-23 || Lk. 10:12-15

²⁰Then Jesus began telling off the cities where he had done his greatest displays of power, because they hadn't changed their hearts:

²¹It's going to be horrible for you, Chorazin! It's going to be horrible for you, Bethsaida! Because if the displays of power had happened in them that happened in you, they would have changed their hearts, sitting in sackcloth and ashes a long time ago! ²²But I'm telling you, it will be easier to bear for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. ²³And you too, Capernaum!

Are you going to be lifted up to heaven?

No, you're going to fall down to Hades!²

Because if the displays of power had happened in Sodom that happened in you, it would still be here today. ²⁴But I'm telling you, it will be easier to bear for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.

¹ For example, this position is taken by the Christian apocalypse *The Ascension of Isaiah* 4:14, followed by the highly respected early Christian theologian Irenaeus of Lyon (early 2nd century to c. 202 CE), *Against Heresies* 5:30:4, also by Irenaeus's influential student Hippolytus of Rome (170–235 CE), *Scholion on Daniel*, 12:2.

² Jesus is alluding here to Isa. 14:13, 15. Some very good ancient mss have "you're going to be *brought down* to Hades" in Mt. 11:23, instead of "you're going to *fall down* to Hades."

What will happen to cities full of unrepentant people when the day of judgment comes? Will they survive to participate in the Reign of God and Jesus Christ? Absolutely not. Unlike the faithful, who will be rescued by the angels and lifted up to heaven to greet Jesus (Mt. 24:30-31; 1 Thess. 4:16-17), they will be destroyed from the earth like Sodom, and will fall down to Hades, to join the unrepentant who have died before them. All of this brings us back to our third question.

3. What Ultimate Fate Awaits Those Judged and Slain or Judged and Found Unworthy of Resurrection at Jesus Christ's Second Coming?

To this question, not even one passage in the Synoptic Gospels and Epistles of the NT offers a direct and explicit answer. We're going to see in the following chapter that the Book of Revelation actually *reveals* some things that hadn't been explicitly revealed before, including a clear answer to this question. But for the present moment, the bare outlines of an answer can be inferred from the information we have in the Gospels and Epistles. Consider this saying, which we looked at briefly in in Chapter 1:

Mt. 10:28 || Lk. 12:4-5

²⁸ Don't be afraid of people who kill the body, but can't kill the soul. Be more afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna.

⁴ And I'm saying to you friends of mine, don't be afraid of those that can kill your body, but after that there's nothing more they can do. ⁵ I'll show you who you should be afraid of—be afraid of the One who, after killing you, has the authority to throw you in Gehenna.

Jesus is teaching that bodily death does not result in the final end of a human being. As he teaches elsewhere, God holds in existence the life of all those who have died: "God is certainly not the God of the dead, but of the living. Because everyone lives to¹ God" (Lk. 20:38). In view of these teachings, it seems reasonable to expect that those unrepentant people who perish when Jesus comes in glory will at some point face resurrection and the final destruction of Gehenna. After all, Luke's version of the saying about Gehenna above explicitly says that there are two phases of divine punishment: God can remove you from bodily life, sending your disembodied consciousness to Hades, and then, in addition to that, God can consign you to Gehenna. The "fire and maggots" of Gehenna describe what happens to the unrepentant when they are released from Hades, and are raised again to bodily life. But there are two oddities here.

First, when the glorious age of God's and Christ's Kingdom dawns, every human being in history will *already* have been judged for their deeds in mortal life.

¹ Or "in."

According to the teaching of Jesus, exclusion from the life of the age to come and imprisonment in Hades is the result of that judgment for unrepentant *living* people (Mt. 11:20-24 || Lk. 10:12-15).¹ Jesus also teaches that, among those who are *dead* when that judgment comes, only those who are “considered worthy” will be raised to take part in the age to come (Lk. 20:35). So how is there, beyond that judgment, a “resurrection of judgment” for the unworthy ones, “those who have done bad things” (Jn 5:28-29)? What do the unrepentant still have to be judged for? After all, whether living or dead at the time of the great judgment—they have already been tried, convicted, and sentenced to a long spell in Hades at the coming of Jesus in glory. And they have already served out this sentence when they are eventually resurrected. Is God going to judge them all over again, and add on bodily punishment for good measure? That just seems weird, and pointless.

Secondly, we already saw, when we looked at “Simple One #1,” that the OT passages Jesus alludes to in his Gehenna sayings (especially Isaiah 66) picture a *battle*, not a courtroom judgment scene—in fact, it is *a battle that has the new creation and the New Jerusalem as its setting*. Can it be that there is, beyond the judgment of the second coming, a further judgment that deals not with people’s past behavior in mortal life, but rather with their behavior in a resurrected state? Is there information in Scripture indicating that the unrepentant, when they are finally resurrected, will use their newfound powers of resurrected life to attack the people of God, with the result that they will be judged and destroyed? Believe it or not, the rock-solid biblical answer to this question is *yes*. Read on.

¹ Rev. 1:18; 19:17-21; 20:5, 13-15 confirm this concept, but we will be looking at those passages in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Resurrection and Judgment in Isaiah 24–27 and Revelation 19–20

Introduction to Isaiah 24–27

We've learned a great deal in the last two chapters about how the biblical writers view the future of the world and humanity. We've looked at passages from the Psalms, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, and Revelation, and we've seen that many important common themes come to the fore:

- God is going to come in glory with his Messiah (identified as Jesus in the NT) to judge the whole world and to transform and renew the creation.
- The violent and the unjust will band together to oppose the coming of God (and his Messiah), but they will be completely removed from the earth.¹
- God's glorious coming will signal massive upheavals in the creation as we know it.
- God and his Messiah will determine who is worthy to take part in the glorious reign in the renewed creation.
- Even those among the dead who are found worthy will be brought to life again, so that all the faithful in all of humanity's history will enjoy the glorious ages to come.²

We're going to see that Isaiah 24–27 brings forth every one of these themes. Whereas many prophecies or sayings touch on one or the other of them, this passage practically tells the story of “the end” from start to finish. And it answers the question that we left at the end of the previous chapter: how does the judgment that occurs when God comes in glory with his Messiah Jesus relate to the eventual “body and soul” destruction of the unrepentant in “Gehenna”? Do those sent to (or left in) the prison of Hades at Christ's return ever get released? What happens then? After all, Jesus ties Gehenna to the prophecy in Isaiah 66 of *a battle outside the walls of the Jerusalem of the new creation*. There are some extra pieces of biblical information that do not fit into the familiar versions of the end-times picture puzzle. Isaiah 24–27, known as “the Isaiah Apocalypse,” is going to find a meaningful place for all of them.

¹ On this particular theme, which appears multiple times in the Psalms, the Prophets, the Epistles, and Revelation, Jesus says almost nothing in the Gospels (but see Mt. 22:6-7; Lk. 19:14, 27).

² The theme of resurrection does not appear explicitly in the Psalms.

Before I begin my commentary, it would be good, if you can, to patiently and prayerfully read Isaiah 24:1–27:5 through in your own Bible. It won't be easy, but it's worth putting some effort into it. Too many Bible readers get impatient and skim over portions that are not immediately easy to understand. They slip into the assumption that OT prophecy is mostly a collection of mumbo-jumbo that no one can understand unless someone in the NT quotes something and explains it. *Jesus and the apostles would never have taught anyone to think like that.* To them, the OT is the Bible. It is revelation from God, which deserves to be studied diligently on its own merits. As Peter says,

2 Pet. 1:19-21

¹⁹And so we have all the more confidence in the message of the prophets. You'll do well to keep your attention on it: use it like a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the morning star rises in your hearts.¹ ²⁰Here's the first point to understand: none of the prophecies of scripture come out of² somebody's own interpretation. ²¹Because prophecy never came by human will. No, it happened when people, carried along by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God.

Let's read Isaiah together with this attitude. As we go I will be listing closely related passages in the Book of Revelation, so you can see how consistently and intimately connected Revelation is to this passage.

Isa. 24:1-3

See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth
and devastate it;

he will ruin its surface³

Rev. 6:14; 16:18, 20

and scatter its inhabitants—

² it will be the same

Rev. 6:15; 19:18

for priest as for people,

for the master as for his servant,

for the mistress as for her servant,

for seller as for buyer,

for borrower as for lender,

for debtor as for creditor.

³ The earth will be completely laid waste
and totally plundered.

The LORD has spoken this word.

¹ Lit. "...hearts, knowing this first:"

² Or "are a matter of."

³ NIV has "face."

Verse 1 is describing what we've seen in many Bible passages in Chapter 2: total upheaval of the physical world associated with God's coming in glory to judge and reign (see v. 23). So this is no ordinary natural disaster. It's not something that those higher on the economic and social status ladder can protect themselves from more easily than the poor. This moment is going to affect everyone on earth equally, no matter what their station in life. All of sinful humanity is going to be shaken out of the earth like dust being shaken out of a rug.

Isa. 24:4-6

⁴ The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers,
the heavens languish with the earth.

⁵ The earth is defiled by its people; Rev. 19:2
they have disobeyed the laws,
violated the statutes

and broken the everlasting covenant. Rev. 11:18f

⁶ Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
its people must bear their guilt.

Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up, Rev. 16:8-9
and very few are left.

Why has God shaken the whole earth so hard that it flings all the human beings from its surface (v. 1)? Verses 4-6 explain why God is going to shake the earth in this way. It is because the earth is drying up and withering, even the skies (v. 4). And why is that? Because of the way people have behaved on the earth (v. 5). They have defiled the earth—which means, they have polluted it. They've broken God's laws and instructions. Worst of all, they have "broken the everlasting covenant," the covenant that God made with Noah when Noah and his family came out of the ark after the flood. At that time, when human beings had only been in existence on earth for a bare ten generations, the earth had become so "filled with violence because of them" that God had to strip humanity back to a tiny root and start over in order to save the earth from destruction at the hands of the human race. God promises Noah that he will never again send a flood to destroy the earth, and he calls this promise "an everlasting covenant." He makes this covenant with Noah and with all living creatures on the earth (Gen. 9:12-16). Every covenant contains responsibilities for each of the parties. God states his side explicitly: he will never again destroy the earth. Humanity's responsibility under this everlasting covenant is left implicit: humanity must never again destroy and "ruin" the earth (see Gen. 6:11-13). In Noah's day, humanity had so corrupted itself, and even the whole life system of the earth, that God was forced to destroy not only humanity, but all major lifeforms. The

flood was a desperate intervention, because if God had not intervened,¹ humanity would have killed itself, taking the whole life system of the earth down with it.

In Isa. 24:4-6, Isaiah is prophesying that humanity will eventually get to the point of global suicide a second time, forcing God to intervene again. As Jesus himself prophesies, “If that time weren’t cut short, not one living soul would be saved” (Mt. 24:22 || Mk 13:20). And a few verses later he says, “It will be like in Noah’s days when the Human One comes” (Mt. 24:37 || Lk. 17:26). This time, however, it will not be with a flood, as in Noah’s day. This time, “heaven and earth will pass away” (Mt. 24:35 || Mk 13:31 || Lk. 21:33), being burned up with fire (Isa. 24:6 above, and 2 Pet. 3:6-13).² The “few who are left” (Isa. 24:6) are the few who are faithful to God.

Isa. 24:7-12

- ⁷ The new wine dries up and the vine withers;
all the merrymakers groan.
- ⁸ The joyful timbrels are stilled, Rev. 18:22
the noise of the revelers has stopped,
the joyful harp is silent.
- ⁹ No longer do they drink wine with a song;
the beer is bitter to its drinkers.
- ¹⁰ The ruined city lies desolate; Rev. 18:23
the entrance to every house is barred.
- ¹¹ In the streets they cry out for wine;
all joy turns to gloom,
all joyful sounds are banished from the earth.
- ¹² The city is left in ruins, Rev. 18:21
its gate is battered to pieces.

Isaiah is describing a total drought (compare vv. 4, 7) that leads to a total famine condition. All the normal human experiences and activities, so taken for granted by a godless world, come to a grinding halt.

Isa. 24:13

- ¹³ So will it be on the earth
and among the nations,
as when an olive tree is beaten, Rev. 14:14-20

¹ NIV wrongly translates the words of God to Noah in Gen. 6:13 as “I am going to put an end to all people.” In Hebrew, the text literally says, “The end of all flesh has come before my face.” God doesn’t say that he plans to kill everyone. He says that he, as Creator and Judge, must make a decision, because all life on earth is about to end due to the violence of humanity.

² Peter, like Jesus, compares the coming crisis of humanity, leading to the removal of all the ungodly and the total transformation of the creation, to Noah’s flood (2 Pet. 3:6-7).

or as when gleanings are left after the grape harvest.

This statement, using similes from the harvesting of olives¹ and grapes, continues the idea of v. 6. All of humanity—with the exception of the faithful, who represent a tiny minority—will perish.²

Isa. 24:14-16a

¹⁴ They raise their voices, they shout for joy; Rev. 19:6
from the west they acclaim the LORD’s majesty.

¹⁵ Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD;
exalt the name of the LORD, the God of Israel,
in the islands of the sea.

^{16a} From the ends of the earth we hear singing:
“Glory to the Righteous One.” Rev. 15:1-4

All over the world—east, west, the furthest islands, the ends of the earth—the faithful are celebrating. How can they celebrate when all of humanity is perishing? Because God’s intervention is good news to them: God is their rescuer, their faithful and just Savior. They are singing a psalm like Psalm 96:

Ps. 96:1-2, 13

¹ Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.

² Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation...

¹³ Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Isa. 24:16b

^{16b} But I said, “I waste away, I waste away!
Woe to me!

The treacherous betray! Mt. 24:10³
With treachery the treacherous betray!” Rev. 17:12-16

¹ The beating is to shake off the ripe olives.

² This is one of the passages that I call *the hard scriptures*. When Jesus is asked (based on scriptures like this and others in Isaiah such as 10:22; 13:12) whether only a few people are going to be saved, he doesn’t deny it. He says, “Try your hardest to go in through the narrow doorway. Because I’m telling you, a lot of people are going to try to go in, and they’re not going to be able to” (Lk. 13:24). And in Mt. 7:14 he says, “The gate that leads to life is very narrow, and the path that leads to life is very tight, and only a few people find it.”

³ See also Mt. 10:21-22, 34-46; Mk 13:12-13; Lk. 21:16-17.

Isaiah had just heard the wonderful sound of the faithful around the world celebrating God's arrival as their righteous King, Savior, and Judge. But now he is overwhelmed with grief and horror. In his vision, something terrible is happening on the earth. An orgy of betrayal is happening among human beings. I believe Isaiah is receiving a hint of what Jesus prophesies about the end of this age in Mt. 24:10: "lots of people are going to leave the faith and they are going to betray one another and hate one another." John, writer of Revelation, also prophesies horrendous betrayals at the end of this age. The "beast" of Revelation 13, after essentially taking over and ruling the entire world as emperor of "Babylon the Great" for three and a half years, switches sides in the last few weeks before Jesus comes in glory. Making a treasonous alliance with Babylon's enemies (Rev. 17:12), the beast works with them to completely destroy Babylon—his own home country—with fire (17:12-13, 15-18). Then he leads his allies, together with the rest of the world, on the suicide mission of fighting against Jesus as he comes in glory (Rev. 16:13-16; 17:14-15; 19:11-21). It's a horrible end for the godless of the earth.

Isa. 24:16b

¹⁷ Terror and pit and snare await you,
people of the earth.

¹⁸ Whoever flees at the sound of terror
will fall into a pit;
whoever climbs out of the pit
will be caught in a snare.

The floodgates of the heavens are opened,
the foundations of the earth shake.

¹⁹ The earth is broken up,
the earth is split asunder,
the earth is violently shaken.

Lk. 21:35

Rev. 16:21

Rev. 6:14; 16:18, 20

Lk. 21:11; Rev. 6:14

Isaiah pictures people being so terrified that they blindly run and fall into a hole. Scrambling out of the hole in their panic, they blindly stumble into a trap. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus' most extended prophetic teaching about the future of the world, a number of very clear references are made to this paragraph:

Isa. 24:14, 17-19 LXX¹

¹⁴...**The water of the ocean will be all stirred up (1)**...¹⁷**Fear (2)** and a pit and a **trap (3)** are **on you who dwell on the earth (4)**! ¹⁸...**Because windows have opened out of heaven (5), and the foundations of the earth are going**

¹ Jesus' words, as Luke records them, are so close to the LXX Greek translation of these verses that it would be fair to say that he is paraphrasing Isaiah. The bold portions of Isaiah 24 and Luke 21 are those that are so close that it is very clear Jesus intends a reference to Isaiah 24.

to be shaken. ¹⁹The earth is going to be utterly terrified (2), the earth is going to be utterly anxious (6).

Lk. 21:25-26, 34-35

²⁵There are going to be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars. And **on the earth (4)**, there'll be **stress and anxiety (6) among the nations (4)** about **the roaring and heaving of the ocean (1)**. ²⁶People are going to be fainting from **fear and dread of the things that are coming on the world (2, 4)**.¹ Because the **powers of the heavens are going to be shaken up (5)** ...³⁴ Watch yourselves... Otherwise...that day will come **on you (4)** ³⁵**like a trap (3)**. Because it's going to **land on everybody that lives on the face of the earth (4)**.

Not only is there treachery among human beings (Isa. 24:16b), but the physical world itself is seen to be losing its stability, leading to a mass anxiety attack verging on total panic.

Isa. 24:19-20

²⁰ The earth reels like a drunkard,
it sways like a hut in the wind;
so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion
that it falls—never to rise again.

Rev. 6:16; 20:11

This is the end for humanity, and the end of life on earth. Humanity's attacks on the life systems of the earth have become too much it to bear. The earth itself perishes.

Isa. 24:21-23

²¹ In that day the LORD will punish
the powers in the heavens above
and the kings on the earth below.

Rev. 12:3, 7-9; 20:1-3

Rev. 19:19-21

²² They will be herded together
like prisoners bound in a dungeon;
they will be shut up in prison
and be punished² after many days.

Mt. 25:41; Rev. 1:18; 9:1; 20:1

Rev. 20:7-10

²³ The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed;
for the LORD Almighty will reign

Rev. 21:23; 22:5

¹ The Greek word here is *oikoumenē* (Strong's #G3625). He is talking about "the world" of humanity. It is very closely synonymous with the expressions "the earth" ("the earth" is shorthand for *humanity on earth* in Isa. 27:19) and "those who dwell on the earth" in Isa. 24:17-19.

² NIV translators' note: Or *released*. The verb here is *pāqad* (Strong's #H6485), which literally means "to visit." In contexts like this in the Hebrew Old Testament, it refers to the coming of divine judgment or punishment. So if they are to be "released," it will be to face trial.

on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders—with great glory.

Rev. 21:1-3, 11

When God comes to reign in glory, all of the godless will perish along with the earth, and all of their exalted rulers—whether earthly and visible and human, or heavenly and invisible and angelic¹—will be incarcerated, every bit as powerless as everyone else, in the “pit” of the underworld.² As of that moment, the power of godless humans and angelic beings to do harm in creation will be *zero*.³ But that is not the end of the story for them. “And after a great many days⁴ they will be visited,” says v. 22, translated literally. In other words, after they have served out a long sentence of incarceration in the underworld of the dead, God will decide their ultimate fate.

Meanwhile, in the land of the living, God’s glory will be so bright that it will put the sun and the moon in the shade (v. 23a). As always in the Psalms and the Prophets, Mount Zion will be the capital of God’s kingdom.

Isa. 25:1-5

^{25:1} LORD, you are my God;
I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done wonderful things,
things planned long ago.

² For you have made the city a heap of rubble,
the fortified town a ruin;
the foreigners’ stronghold a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.

³ Therefore strong peoples will honor you;
cities of ruthless nations will revere you.

⁴ You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless
is like a storm driving against a wall

⁵ and like the heat of the desert.

Rev. 18:21-23

¹ For hidden angelic powers who are oriented against God and the faithful, see Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 2:6-8; Eph. 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 2:15.

² “The pit” (Heb. *bōr*, Strong’s #H953) and “Sheol” (Heb. *she’ōl*, Strong’s #H7585), the underworld of the dead, are typically treated as synonymous in the OT. See Isa. 14:15, 19; 24:22; 38:18.

³ Those who understand Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 as referring to the defeat of the devil ought to see a strong parallel here (Isa. 24:21–22 || Isa. 14:5–20 || Ezek. 28:1–19 || Rev. 20:1–3). For the idea that unrepentant angelic beings will be subjected to the same fate as human beings, see Mt. 25:41.

⁴ The LXX has “and after many generations,” implying hundreds of years, as opposed to a few years or decades.

You silence the uproar of foreigners;
 as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,
 so the song of the ruthless is stilled. Rev. 16:12-16; 19:19-21

Isaiah bursts out in a psalm of praise to God, who has come to reign in glory. The capital city of the ruthless empire that had been oppressing the faithful and the poor lies ruined, flattened to a pile of rubble—never to be rebuilt again. The relief of God’s rescue from the oppression of the godless will be instant and complete—like being given shelter from a roaring storm, or like the moment a thick cloud passes over the sun on a burning hot day.

Isa. 25:6-10

⁶ On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
 a feast of rich food for all peoples, Mt. 8:11 || Lk. 13:29
 a banquet of aged wine— Rev. 19:9
 the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy Rev. 14:1; 21:10
 the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
 the sheet that covers all nations; Rev. 21:1-3

⁸ he will swallow up death forever. Rev. 21:4; 22:2, 5
 The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
 from all faces; Rev. 7:17; 21:3
 he will remove his people’s disgrace
 from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken.

⁹ In that day they will say,
 “Surely this is our God;
 we trusted in him, and he saved us.
 This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
 let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” Rev. 19:7

^{10a} The hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain. Rev. 21:3, 22

Jesus is referring specifically to this passage when he says that “lots of people are going to come from the East and from the West and eat the banquet dinner with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Heaven’s Reign” (Mt. 8:11). When God’s glorious reign (Isa. 24:23) comes to the earth, its subjects are going to be the faithful all nations, ethnicities, and languages. For those invited to take part in God’s kingdom, there will a great celebration of God’s intimate presence and saving love. In God’s kingdom, there will no longer be a veil between God and humanity; no longer will heaven, God’s dwelling, be separate from earth. No longer will there be any source of grief—God’s glorious coming will have brought a permanent end not only to

cruelty and injustice and persecution, but even to death itself. Jesus reveals the same reality to John in Revelation:

Rev. 21:1-4

And I saw a renewed heaven, and a renewed earth: the first heaven and the first earth had gone away, and the sea wasn't there anymore. ²And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. She was all dressed up, like a bride all ready for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying,

Look! God's home is with humanity!
 He is going to live with them,
 And they're going to be his people,
 And God himself, their God, is going to be with them.
⁴God is going to wipe every tear from their eyes,
 And death will no longer exist.
 Nor will grief, nor crying, nor pain, exist any longer,
 Because the previous things are gone.

Isaiah now turns to the fate of those *not* invited to God's glorious banquet:

Isa. 25:10b-12

^{10b} But Moab will be trampled in their land
 as straw is trampled down in the manure.
¹¹ They will stretch out their hands in it,
 as swimmers stretch out their hands to swim.
 God will bring down their pride
 despite the cleverness of their hands.
¹² He will bring down your high fortified walls
 and lay them low;
 he will bring them down to the ground,
 to the very dust.

Isaiah prophesies that nearby enemy nations, who used to pose a constant threat to the people of God, will not be making an appearance at this banquet, nor will they pose any further danger to the faithful. Symbolically speaking, it will be as though they are outside, swimming around in the cesspit of their own waste (vv. 10b-11).

Isa. 26:1-3

^{26:1} In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:
 We have a strong city;
 God makes salvation

its walls and ramparts.

Isa. 54:11-12; Rev. 21:18-20

² Open the gates

Rev. 21:24-27

that the righteous nation may enter,
the nation that keeps faith.

³ You will keep in perfect peace

those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.

This is the New Jerusalem, the wonderful dwelling place that is “prepared by God” (Jn 14:1-4; Heb. 11:14-16). As we saw in Rev. 21:1-4 above, it “comes down from heaven” and so it is not built by human hands (see also Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:12). It is the everlasting home of all faithful people, and its security, which comes from God alone, is complete. Its citizens rest in perfect peace of mind, because they trust in God as their defender.

Isa. 26:4-6

⁴ Trust in the LORD forever,

for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal.

⁵ He humbles those who dwell on high,

he lays the lofty city low;

he levels it to the ground

and casts it down to the dust.

⁶ Feet trample it down—

the feet of the oppressed,

the footsteps of the poor.

Isaiah now calls on those who read his prophecy to trust in the LORD, because he is the Eternal One. He will accomplish what has been promised (Isa. 25:1-2). The day will certainly come when he lifts you up, and turns those who have oppressed you to dust under your feet. This moment of salvation has been planned from eternity.

Isa. 26:7-9

⁷ The path of the righteous is level;

you, the Upright One, make the way of the righteous smooth.

⁸ Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws,¹

we wait for you;

Rev. 14:12

your name and renown

are the desire of our hearts.

⁹ My soul yearns for you in the night;

in the morning my spirit longs for you.

¹ NIV footnote: Or *judgments*.

When your judgments come upon the earth,
the people of the world learn righteousness.

Isaiah again turns to praise and prayer in response to the revelation he is being given. He believes that God holds the faithful on the right path for them, no matter what the circumstances (v. 7). His mind is stayed on God; his heart and his soul are fixed on the moment when God will come in glory to teach the entire world the principles of justice and righteousness.

Isa. 26:10-11

¹⁰ But when grace is shown to the wicked,
they do not learn righteousness.

In the land of integrity they do evil,
and do not see the majesty of the LORD.¹

¹¹ LORD, your hand is lifted high,
but they do not see it.

Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame;

let the fire reserved for your enemies consume them. Heb. 10:27; Rev. 20:9

We read in Isaiah 24 that all of the godless, both human and angelic, are going to be taught a lesson about what's right and wrong when God comes in glory as Judge and Ruler of creation. They will be confronted with the fact that their lawlessness has resulted in the destruction of the earth (26:9, looking back on 24:5-6). At the inauguration of God's glorious rule, they are all going to be banished from the earth and imprisoned together in "the pit," to be dealt with "after many days" (Isa. 24:2, 21-22; see similarly Isa. 14:15). In this passage we read of a time when they will receive God's grace (v. 10a), apparently in the context of the peaceful and secure reign of God (26:1-6). Remarkably, they have not learned from their painful confrontation with the truth, nor from their long incarceration, nor from the grace of being granted release from prison. In a word, they have not repented.

It appears (v. 10c) that they have it in mind to try the same destructive ways they had habitually followed before, right here in God's glorious kingdom. They get ready to attack "the strong city," whose walls are defended by God himself (26:1-3), but they're not going to get a chance to lay a finger on God's beloved. Whereas the faithful sang and celebrated when they experienced "the majesty of the LORD" (24:14), these self-blinded ones "do not see the majesty of the LORD" (26:10d).² Nor will they see the LORD's hand when it is raised to strike them before they can do any

¹ I prefer my own literal translation of this sentence. NIV has, less literally, "even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil, and do not regard the majesty of the LORD."

² Isaiah uses two very closely related words for "majesty" in 24:12 and here in 26:10. They are *ga'own* (Strong's #1347) and *ga'ah* (Strong's #1342).

harm whatsoever to the beloved city. Their destruction will come as suddenly and totally as it came on Sodom and Gomorrah. Fire will evaporate them.

Isa. 26:12-13

¹² LORD, you establish peace for us;

all that we have accomplished you have done for us.

¹³ LORD our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us,

but your name alone do we honor. Rev. 2:3, 13; 3:8; 12:11; 15:2-4

Yet again (see 25:1-3; 26:3, 7-9) Isaiah turns to prayer in response to what has been revealed to him. He prays about the fact that most of what the faithful experience in this age is oppression by the powerful and the wicked. He commits himself to remain faithful along with all those who honor God's name.

Isa. 26:14-15

¹⁴ They have died, they are not alive;

their *spirits* will not rise.

Heb. *refa'iyim*¹

You have visited them [for judgment] and destroyed them;

you have caused all memory of them to perish.²

¹⁵ You have enlarged the nation, LORD;

you have enlarged the nation.

You have gained glory for yourself;

you have extended all the borders of the land.

The ones who have died (v. 14) are those who, up to the point when God intervened in Isaiah 24, had possessed the upper hand in the world—especially “the kings of the earth,” who used to oppress God's people (v. 13, see also 24:21). When God came in glory as judge, God “visited them” for judgment,³ removing them from the earth and sending them to the prison of the underworld. Since the inauguration of God's glorious reign, no one has had the slightest thought of them anymore, let alone anxiety over the danger they once posed.

Isa. 26:16-17a

¹⁶ LORD, they came to you in their distress;

when you disciplined them,

¹ This is the same word as in Isa. 14:9.

² This is my slightly more literal translation of v. 14. NIV has “They are now dead, they live no more; their spirits do not rise. You punished them and brought them to ruin; you wiped out all memory of them.”

³ The Hebrew word “visit” (*paqad*, Strong's #H6485) is often used in the OT as a figure of speech meaning to judge and/or punish. A similar expression in English would be to speak of God coming to “deal with” somebody. It carries this sense five times in this larger section (Isa. 24–27): see Isa. 24:21, 22; 26:14, 21; 27:1.

they could barely whisper a prayer,¹
¹⁷ As a pregnant woman about to give birth
 writhes and cries out in her pain.

1 Thess. 5:3

When God came in glory to judge the world and to reign (24:21-23), the powerful and the violent found themselves helpless and in distress, and could only plead for mercy. Their arrogance was turned upside down.

Isa. 26:17b-19

^{17b} so were we in your presence, LORD.
¹⁸ We were with child, we writhed in labor,
 but we gave birth to wind.
 We have not brought salvation to the earth,
 and the people of the world have not come to life.
¹⁹ But your dead will live, LORD;
 their bodies will rise—
 let those who dwell in the dust
 wake up and shout for joy—
 your dew is like the dew of the morning;
 the earth will give birth to her dead.

The fortunes of the faithful and the violent oppressors were reversed when God came in glory to judge the world and put all things to rights (Isa. 24:21–25:5). The faithful had been in distress—indeed, they had been near to complete despair. Not only were they unable to bring forth God’s salvation on the earth; they couldn’t even save themselves (vv. 17b-18). But God’s coming brings salvation to the faithful, even resurrection! Those who rise to join in God’s glorious kingdom will be as fresh and new as the morning dew on the fields (v. 19). Isaiah now realizes that God will not simply put an end to death for those few who survive to take part in God’s glorious kingdom; God will put an end to death for all the faithful—including those who have already died!

Isa. 26:20-21

²⁰ Go, my people, enter your rooms
 and shut the doors behind you;
 hide yourselves for a little while
 until his wrath has passed by.
²¹ See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling
 to punish the people of the earth for their sins.

¹ Literally: LORD, in trouble they came to you; they poured out a prayer; your discipline was upon them. NIV translators’ note: The meaning of the Hebrew for this clause is uncertain.

The earth will disclose the blood shed on it;
the earth will conceal its slain no longer.

This passage seems to reveal the scene of protection and confrontation that we saw in 26:10-11 again from a different angle, this time from the point of view of God, who gently directs his people,¹ “the righteous nation,” whose citizens live in the new Zion (26:1-3), to go into their inner rooms and shut the door. God has some unpleasantness to deal with, but they needn’t fear or worry in the slightest. God is going to destroy, once and for all, those who persist in making themselves his enemies and the enemies of his beloved. This time there will not be burial and eventual resurrection. That is all past now. Their judgment and destruction will take place out in the open, on the bare ground (see Isa. 66:22-24).

Isa. 27:1

¹ In that day,
the LORD will punish with his sword—
his fierce, great and powerful sword—
Leviathan the gliding serpent,
Leviathan the coiling serpent;²
he will slay the monster of the sea.

Job 26:13

Leviathan, in literal terms, is probably the sperm whale—huge, ferocious, fearless, and pretty much invincible in the minds of the ancients (Job 41:1-34; Ps. 104:26). But in the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia of the 3rd millennium BCE, Leviathan is the seven-headed cosmic sea serpent who represents the most fundamental forces of evil, chaos, and danger.³ In Ps. 74:12-14, the psalmist praises God’s triumph over Leviathan in the creation of the world:



Ps. 74:10-14

¹⁰ How long will the enemy mock you, God?
Will the foe revile your name forever?
¹¹ Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?
Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them!
¹² But God is my King from long ago;

Isa. 26:11

¹ This word is singular, referring to the community that God loves and protects as his own.

² The Hebrew word Leviathan is actually formed from the verb “to coil,” which Isaiah uses to describe him.

³ The image to the right shows two gods spearing a seven-headed monster. It is a photo of an impression taken from a 3rd millennium BCE cylinder seal excavated from the ruins of the city of Eshnunna, in modern-day Iraq. Eshnunna was an important city in the time of Abraham, and was located a little over 200 miles north of Ur, Abraham’s birthplace. Photo Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

he brings salvation on the earth.

¹³ It was you who split open the sea by your power; Gen. 1:6-7
you broke the heads of the monster in the waters.

¹⁴ It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan
and gave it as food to the creatures of the desert.

¹⁵ It was you who opened up springs and streams;
you dried up the ever-flowing rivers.

¹⁶ The day is yours, and yours also the night; Gen. 1:8
you established the sun and moon. Gen. 1:14-18

¹⁷ It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; Gen. 1:9-10
you made both summer and winter.

When God brought order and life out of the original watery chaos in the very beginning (Gen. 1:1-10), Leviathan the many-headed sea monster (Ps. 74:12-14) was symbolically defeated. He was symbolically defeated again in the defeat of Egypt, the oldest and deadliest of Israel's enemies: compare Ps. 74:13-14 with Isa. 51:9-10; Ps. 87:4; 89:9-13, which use his other name, Rahab.¹ But Leviathan has never yet been completely defeated, and he always presents a lurking, deadly danger. In Isa. 27:1 Isaiah prophesies that the day on which God finally and permanently removes the threat of human enemies (26:20-21 || 26:10-11) will also be the day on which he finally and permanently slays Leviathan. On that day, *all* evil and danger—both human and cosmic—will come to a final end.

Isa. 27:2-5

² In that day—

“Sing about a fruitful vineyard:

³ I, the LORD, watch over it;
I water it continually.

I guard it day and night
so that no one may harm it.

⁴ I am not angry.

If only there were briars and thorns confronting me!

I would march against them in battle;

I would set them all on fire.

⁵ Or else let them come to me for refuge;

let them make peace with me,

yes, let them make peace with me.”

Just as we saw in Isa. 26:20-21, the final confrontation with the enemies of God's people is revealed from God's point of view and in God's voice. This time, God is

¹ This name is spelled differently in Hebrew than the name of Rahab, the woman of Jericho (Josh. 2:1-21; 6:17, 25).

not talking to his people about the fact that he is going to deal with who are threatening them (26:21-22); he is talking to those who are threatening his people about how he is going to deal with *them*. God’s vineyard is his beloved people (Isa. 5:1–7; 27:6), now redeemed and under God’s constant nurture and watchful protection (vv. 3-4a). The vineyard represents the blessed Jerusalem of God’s glorious reign (25:6-10a; 26:1-4, 12, 20).

It’s surprising how gently God speaks to those who might have an idea to attack the beloved vineyard. I am not angry, says God; I have nothing at all against you (v. 4a). But if you really insist on coming against my people, so be it. Do what you’re going to do.¹ Just be warned: I will make anyone who attacks them disappear in a ball of flame like a stack of thorny weeds. God follows this dire warning with a heartfelt invitation (v. 5): Don’t throw away your life—come under my protection too! Be reconciled to me! Be reconciled to me! These are the last words God will ever say to those who will simply never repent (Isa. 26:9-11; 57:15-21).

Summary of Isaiah 24–27

What we have just read in these four chapters of Isaiah is a uniquely detailed story of the end of the world. It’s a story that is echoed over and over in teachings of Jesus and in the NT, but above all in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation. Here is the story in outline form:

6. The end of this world, this age of history, will come when humanity manages to destroy its own living environment, the ecosystem of the earth. Humanity’s toxic and covenant-breaking practices are destined to cause the whole world to wither and burn up (Isa. 24:4-7a). This is echoed in various places in the Book of Revelation, especially Rev. 11:18, in which the end of this age happens when God comes as king and judge to “destroy those who destroy the earth.”
7. In this crisis, God is going to intervene on behalf of those who have lived faithfully. They will be rescued (Isa. 24:14-16a; 25:4-5, 9; 26:4-6). The songs of praise from “the ends of the earth” (24:16) find an echo in the words of Jesus from the Olivet Discourse: “He’ll gather together his chosen ones from the four winds—from the far end of the earth to the far end of the sky”² (Mk 13:27).
8. God’s intervention will inaugurate his glorious reign on a healed earth. All the faithful of all time are going to be honored guests at a great royal banquet that signals the end of death, crying, and pain. They will be rescued if they are

¹ Verse 4b has the form of a question, “Will someone bring me briars and thorns?” But it is probably to be read as an invitation (compare 2 Sam. 23:15, which has the same grammatical form).

² Or “to the far end of heaven.”

living when God comes to reign, and they will be resurrected if they have died beforehand (Isa. 24:23; 25:4-10a; 26:1-3, 15, 19). Jesus refers to this banquet when he says, “I’m telling you, lots of people are going to come from the East and from the West and eat the banquet dinner¹ with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Heaven’s Reign” (Mt. 8:11).

9. At the moment when God comes to reign, the unrepentant who are living on the earth, together with the angelic powers that have been unfaithful to their commission to guide and help humanity, will be removed from the earth, and consigned to imprisonment together in the underworld for a long time (Isa. 24:17-23; see Ps. 82). Jesus speaks of this judgment in Mt. 25:41, when he says, “Get away from me, all of you cursed ones! Go away into the age-long² fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”
10. The unrepentant who have died before God comes to reign *will not* be raised when the faithful are raised. They will remain imprisoned in the underworld with those who have just joined them in the world-transition crisis (Isa. 26:14, 16-17a; compare 24:21-22). This is reflected in the NT phrase “resurrection from among the dead,” and it is specifically paralleled by Rev. 20:5, which says that “the rest of the dead didn’t come to life until the thousand years were over.”
11. At some point a long time (“many days”) *after* God’s reign has come, when resurrection life and complete peace have become the normal conditions on the earth, God decide that it is the right moment to deal with those human and angelic beings who have been imprisoned (Isa. 24:21-22). They will receive God’s clemency and will be given their freedom. Far from accepting the gift of release from the prison of death through resurrection with joy and gratitude, they will amass in envy, greed, and self-deception to attack God’s peaceful people in the New Jerusalem (Isa. 26:9b-12, 20-21; 27:1-5; see Isa. 24:21-22). The author of Hebrews points to Isaiah’s picture of the final judgment and destruction of the unrepentant in Heb. 10:27, when he warns that those who spurn God’s grace in Jesus Christ must face “only the terrible expectation of judgment, and *a furious fire that’s going to consume the enemies*” (the italicized words are a direct quotation of Isa. 26:11 LXX).

What’s striking about this final point is that God insists that he holds no built-up resentment against these would-be attackers of his people. As far as God is concerned, they are free to start afresh and enjoy his love and protection. They truly have a clean slate. But they do not change from their destructive and self-delusional

¹ Lit. “come and lie down with Abraham...” Moderns sit to eat at a banquet; people of Jesus’ day reclined. “The banquet” is supplied to help bring forward the reference to Isa. 25:6.

² Most translations use the word “eternal” or “everlasting” here for the Greek word *aiōnios* (Strong’s #G166) and in Mt. 25:46. I will explain in detail why I use the translation “age-long” in Chapter 5, starting on p. 121 below.

ways. They charge blindly into a fire that consumes them completely (Isa. 27:4 || Isa. 26:10-11). Isa. 27:2-5 reveals a profound and shocking truth: that the ultimate destruction of the unrepentant does not come because God refuses to let them repent. It's just the opposite. Their destruction comes because they prove themselves to be irreconcilable enemies despite God's offer of total amnesty and a new leaf. God's mercy reaching out towards incorrigibly evil people is one of Isaiah's unique prophetic themes, and we encounter it again in another oracle:

Isa. 57:15-19

- ¹⁵ For this is what the high and exalted One says—
 he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
 “I live in a high and holy place,
 but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
 to revive the spirit of the lowly
 and to revive the heart of the contrite.
¹⁶ I will not accuse them forever,
 nor will I always be angry,
 for then they would faint away because of me—
 the very people I have created.
¹⁷ I was angry because of their sinful greed;¹
 I punished them, and hid my face in anger,
 yet they kept on in their willful ways.
¹⁸ I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;
 I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners,
¹⁹ creating praise on their lips.
 Peace, peace, to those far and near,”
 says the LORD. “And I will heal them.”
²⁰ But the wicked are like the tossing sea,
 which cannot rest,
 whose waves cast up mire and mud.
²¹ “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

Isaiah reveals here and in Isa. 27:1-5 one of the deepest and saddest mysteries of God's creation. The thing that gives rise to the ultimate destruction of the unrepentant is not, after all, any lack of love for them on God's part, nor does it stem from any lack of divine patience and mercy. *Their perdition results from their adamant refusal to accept God's offer of reconciliation and take part constructively in his creation.*

¹ For some reason NIV translators render this phrase as “I was enraged by their sinful greed,” but there is no good reason to use the out-of-control-sounding word “enraged.” The very same Hebrew word for anger occurs in 57:16 and twice in 57:17.

Introduction to Revelation 19–20

In introducing Isaiah 24–27, I said that those four chapters contain the most explicit and complete vision of the end of the world in the entire OT. Exactly the same can be said of Revelation 17:1–22:6 in the NT. God’s truth is one, so it shouldn’t surprise us to discover that the all of the elements of the story of Isaiah 24–27 are mirrored in the story of the end that we read in the final chapters of Revelation. It also shouldn’t surprise us if we read things in this section of Revelation that Jesus hardly talked about in his ministry on earth. After all, *giving us further revelation about the future is the whole reason why Jesus gave us the Book of Revelation* (see Rev. 1:1). As I’ve done before, I’m going to quote a section and comment briefly on it. I’ll start with a couple of short background passages.

Rev. 12:7-9

⁷And there was a war in heaven. Michael and his angels were at war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought, ⁸but he wasn’t powerful enough. They weren’t allowed to be in heaven anymore. ⁹The great dragon was thrown down. He’s the ancient serpent, who’s called the devil and Satan. He’s the one who deceives the whole world. He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Rev. 16:13-14, 16

¹³And I saw, coming out of the mouths of the dragon and the beast and the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴Those are demonic spirits that do miracles. They go out to the kings of the whole world. They get them together for the war on the great day of God the All Powerful.

...

¹⁶And they got them all together at the place known in the Jewish language as Har-Magedon.

Why does it say in Isa. 24:21-22 that “the LORD will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and on earth the kings of the earth, and they will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit”? The answer, which only hinted at in Isaiah, is stated right out in the open in the Book of Revelation. Satan, along with a third of the angelic hosts of heaven, will turn against God, and will succeed in deceiving all of unrepentant humanity on earth (Rev. 12:9; 13:3-4, 8, 14). Deceived by Satan and his unclean spirits, “the kings of the whole world” will lead their people to the Battle of Har-Magedon. On the battlefield of Har-Magedon, rebellious humanity and rebellious

angels will make their last stand together on earth. They will attempt to violently resist the coming Reign of God and of Jesus Christ. As the 24 elders¹ prophesy,

Rev. 11:17-18

We thank you, O Lord God, the Almighty, Isa. 24:23–25:1
 Who is and who was,
 Because you’ve taken your great power and have begun to rule. Isa. 24:23
¹⁸The nations were angry,
 And your wrath came,
 And the time came to judge the dead, Isa. 26:14-19
 And to give rewards to your servants the prophets,
 And to the holy ones,
 And to those who revere your name, the weak and the powerful,
 And to destroy those who are destroying the earth. Isa. 24:6, 19-20

Reading our Text within the Larger Story of Revelation 17:1–22:6

Remember how Isaiah, after hearing sounds of rejoicing and praise at the coming of God’s Reign, suddenly experienced a wrenching spasm of grief and dread, because “the treacherous deal treacherously, the treacherous deal very treacherously” (Isa. 24:16b)? Rev. 16:13 above begins to reveal what that was about. The beast, formerly emperor of Babylon the Great, the most powerful civilization and the greatest empire ever to appear in the history of humankind, now switches sides and betrays his entire kingdom to be incinerated by the kings of the east:

Rev. 17:12-18

¹²“The ten horns that you saw are ten rulers. They haven’t taken up their rule yet. But they get authority for a single moment along with the beast. ¹³These rulers have a single intention, and they give their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴They’re going to go to war against the Lamb, but the Lamb is going to defeat them. Because he’s Lord of Lords and Ruler of Rulers. And those who are with him are called, chosen and faithful.”

... ¹⁶And the ten horns you saw, and the beast, they’re going to hate the prostitute [Babylon the Great], and they’re going to make her desolate and strip her naked. They’re going to eat her flesh and burn her up with fire. ¹⁷Because God has put it into their hearts to carry out his intention. So they carry out one intention, and give their rulership to the beast, until God’s words have come to fulfillment. ¹⁸And the woman that you saw—she’s the great city that has sovereignty over the rulers of the earth.”

¹ Notice mention of the LORD’s “elders” in Isa. 24:23.

John reveals that the coming of the Reign of God and his Christ will be preceded by the greatest act of treachery and mass murder in the history of the world. Revelation 18 goes on to describe the terrible, fiery destruction of Babylon the Great.

Rev. 18:4, 8

Leave, my people! Leave her!
That way you won't participate in her sins,
and you won't get her plagues.

...

Because of that, her plagues are going to arrive all on one day:
Death, sorrow, and famine, Isa. 24:7-11
And she's going to be destroyed by fire, Isa. 24:6
Because the Lord God, her judge, is powerful.

Some of us are tempted to read in Revelation 17–18 a symbolic description of the future of our own (“Western”) civilization. After all, it is already the richest and most consumption-addicted civilization in the history of humanity. Those who share that sense of recognition would do well to ponder what John’s prophetic warning in Rev. 18:4 means for them.

Rev. 19:5-7

And a voice came from the throne, saying,
Praise our God, all his servants:
Those who revere him,
The weak and the powerful. Rev. 11:18

And I heard something like a massive crowd,
and like the sound of a roaring waterfall,
and like the sound of powerful rumbles of thunder.

They were saying,
Hallelujah!
Our Lord God, the All Powerful, now reigns!

Let's celebrate and be happy,
Let's give him the glory, Isa. 24:14-16
Because it's the Lamb's wedding day,
And his bride has gotten herself all ready.

...

And the angel said to me, “Write, ‘Those who've been invited to the
Lamb's wedding banquet are blessed!’ ” Isa. 25:6

Just as in Isa. 24:14-16, scenes of treachery and devastation on earth (Rev. 16–18) give way to celebration and praise to God, because God is now going to reign on earth. As always in the Book of Revelation, God's coming is equally Jesus Christ's

coming; God’s reign is equally Jesus Christ’s reign. The great inaugural banquet of God’s glorious reign on earth (Isa. 25:6) is here revealed as the wedding banquet of his Son, Jesus the Messiah, who symbolically marries the whole community of the faithful (Rev. 19:7 above).¹

Rev. 19:17-21

¹⁷And I saw an angel standing in the sun. He shouted with a loud voice, calling to all the birds that fly up high in the sky: “Come, gather together for the great feast of God! ¹⁸Come eat the flesh of rulers, the flesh of commanders, the flesh of influential people, and the flesh of horses and riders—the flesh of everyone: the free, the enslaved, the weak, and the powerful.” Isa. 24:2

¹⁹And I saw the beast, together with the kings of the earth and their armies. They’d gotten together to make war against the One who sat on the horse, and against his armies. ²⁰The beast was captured, along with the false prophet. He was the one who’d done those miracles with the beast’s approval. He’d used them to deceive those who accepted the beast’s stamp, and those who worshiped his image. Those two were thrown alive into the lake that’s on fire with burning sulfur. ²¹All the rest were killed by the sword of the One who sat on the horse—the sword that came out of his mouth. Isa. 24:21

In Chapter 2, we learned that when God (or God and his Messiah, as in Psalms 2 and 110) comes to establish his glorious reign on earth, that is going to spark a violent and decisive confrontation between God (and Messiah) and rebellious humanity. We learned (especially in Isa. 24) that the new age of global peace and justice that God’s reign will initiate will be preceded by a global crisis, in which nearly all of humanity will perish. When we read Rev. 19:11-21 (along with Rev. 6:12-17 and 11:15-19) against this background, it becomes obvious that these passages in Revelation are revealing the same decisive moment of transition from the current evil age to the age to come. Both in Rev. 6:12-17 and here in Rev. 19:17-21, just as in Isa. 24:2, all the familiar classes of humanity are equally affected (see also Ezek. 39:17-20). In Rev. 19:17-21, John describes the battle of Har-Magedon that was announced in Rev. 16:16. One single weapon is all Jesus needs to defeat the rebels: his truthful testimony (19:21). Notice the expression “the kings of the earth” in v. 19, which alludes to Isa. 24:21.²

If the human, earthly participants in this battle—with the exception of the specially-punished beast and the false prophet—are killed (Rev. 19:21), where do

¹ See also Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17; Mt. 22:2; Eph. 5:25-32.

² See also Ps. 2:2; 110:5-6.

they go? Are they simply gone forever? No. In Revelation, people who are killed go to Hades, the underworld realm of the dead (Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14).¹ Hades is the Greek word that the Septuagint (LXX) uses to translate the OT Hebrew term for the underworld of the dead, *Sheol*.² Sheol and Hades and “the pit”³ (used in Isa. 24:22) are treated as synonyms in the OT. In the OT, all of these terms signify the underworld, pictured as a prison for the spirits of dead human beings. “The bottomless pit,” otherwise known as “the abyss,”⁴ is yet another term for the underworld, which is used in the NT to signify both the underworld prison for the spirits of the dead (Rom. 10:7; Rev. 11:7; 17:8)⁵ and a prison for demonic beings (Lk. 8:31; Rev. 9:1-2; 20:1-3). The point of all this is going to become clear when we read the next verses:

Rev. 20:1-3

¹And I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had the key to the bottomless pit in his hand, and a huge chain. ²He grabbed the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and he chained him up for a thousand years. ³He threw him in the bottomless pit, and closed it and sealed it over him. That way, he couldn't deceive the nations anymore, until the thousand years were over. After that, he has to be set free for a little while.

Satan, leader of the rebel “hosts of heaven on high” (Rev. 12:3-4a, 7-9; Isa. 24:21; Ps. 82:1-8) is captured and imprisoned in the bottomless pit along with the “kings of the earth,” who have themselves just been slain and sent to the underworld. This passage closely parallels Isa. 24:21-22. In Isaiah, the two parties are to be held in the prison of the pit *for many days*; here Satan is going to be held in the underworld prison *for a thousand years*. And just two verses later we will read that all those who have just been slain are also going to be left in Hades *for a thousand years* (20:5). In Isaiah, the imprisonment of the hosts of heaven and the kings of the earth *prepares for God's glorious reign on Zion* (a poetic name for Jerusalem); here it *prepares for the reign of Jesus Christ and the resurrected holy ones in the “Beloved City”* (20:6, 9, below).

When John sees the imprisonment of the devil, and sees him bound with a huge chain, he understands that the devil will not only be *imprisoned*, but will also be bound for a thousand years *within the prison of the underworld itself*. The

¹ Gr. *hadēs*, Strong's #G86. See also Mt. 11:23 || Lk. 10:15; Lk. 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31.

² Heb. *she'ōl*, Strong's #H7585.

³ Heb. *bōr*, Strong's #H953. Isa. 14:15, 19; 24:22; 38:18. Another Hebrew word for “pit” and synonym for both *she'ōl* and *bōr* is *shachath*, Strong's #H7845. See, among many examples, Job 33:18, 22, 24, 28; Isa. 38:17.

⁴ Gr. *abussos*, Strong's #G12.

⁵ The word *abussos* is also sometimes used to refer to the underworld of the dead in the LXX: see Ps. 71:20; Ezek. 26:19; 31:15; Jon. 2:5-6. More often it refers to the deep ocean or the water table under the earth.

implication is that he will be powerless even in the underworld.¹ Though he has duped all of unrepentant humanity into worshiping him for three and a half years (Rev. 13:4-5), he won't be able to “deceive the nations anymore” (Rev. 20:3) because now he will be as powerless as his fellow inmates for the thousand years. They will see him for what he is—a created being who tried to masquerade as God, and who ended up leading all of unrepentant humanity over a cliff. John probably has in mind this scene from earlier in Isaiah:

Isa. 14:9-15

⁹ *The realm of the dead* below is all astir
to meet you at your coming;
it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you—
all those who were leaders in the world;
it makes them rise from their thrones—
all those who were kings over the nations.
¹⁰ They will all respond,
they will say to you,
“You also have become weak, as we are;
you have become like us.”
...
¹² How you have fallen from heaven,
morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,
you who once laid low the nations!
¹³ You said in your heart,
...
¹⁴ “I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.”
¹⁵ But you are brought down
to *the realm of the dead*,
to the depths of *the pit*.
Heb. *Sheol*, Gr. *Hades*
Heb. *refa’iyim*²
Heb. *Sheol*, Gr. *Hades*
Heb. *bōr*³

¹ John Milton’s fantasy of the devil saying “Better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven” (*Paradise Lost*, 1.263) is completely off base. When the devil goes to the underworld, he rules *nothing*.

² This is the same word as in Isa. 26:14.

³ This is the same word as in Isa. 24:22.

Rev. 20:4-6

⁴And I saw thrones, and people sat on them.¹ They were given the task of passing judgment.² And I saw the souls of the people who'd been executed³ because of the testimony of Jesus, and because of the word of God—whoever⁴ hadn't worshiped the beast and his image, and hadn't taken his stamp on their forehead and their hand. They came alive⁵ and ruled with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵The rest of the dead didn't come to life⁶ until the thousand years were over. This is the first resurrection. ⁶The person who gets to take part⁷ in the first resurrection is blessed and holy. The second death doesn't have any power at all over them. They're going to be priests of God and of Christ, and they're going to rule with him for the thousand years.⁸

My comments on this section are going to have to be a little longer and more detailed, for two reasons. First, John has packed a lot of meaning into it, but secondly, it is probably the single most contested passage in the single most contested book of the Bible. So, take your time. Ask yourself, every time I say something, “Is this interpretation making sense? Is it making *more* or *less* sense than the explanations I've heard before? Does this interpretation tie Rev. 20:4-6 clearly, specifically, and meaningfully to related passages in Revelation, the NT, and the OT? Does it make it make things complicated, disconnected, and confusing, or does it make things clear, connected, and understandable?” Let's get started.

This scene, in context, strongly recalls the great judgment scene of Daniel 7, which brings an end to human history and inaugurates the unending kingdom of “the Human One” and the holy ones:

- “Thrones” are set up (Rev. 20:4 || Dan. 7:9), and God's court sits, bringing this evil age to a close and judging all of humanity.
- John (Rev. 19:11–20:6), like Daniel (7:9-14, 21-22), sees visions of the great judgment both as a battle and as a trial.
- Jesus Christ, who is the Son of Man, the Human One, appears triumphant in heaven (Rev. 19:11; see 1:13; 14:14 || Dan. 7:13).

¹ See Dan. 7.

² Lit. “and judgment was given to them.” It can also mean, “and judgment was passed in their favor,” or “and judgment was passed by them.”

³ Or “beheaded”: lit. “given the ax.”

⁴ Or “and whoever.”

⁵ Or “And they lived.”

⁶ Lit. “didn't live.”

⁷ Lit. “has a portion.”

⁸ Some mss have, “a thousand years.”

- At the point when this great trial is convened, the “beast” has been murderously persecuting the holy ones for three and a half years (Rev. 12:6, 14; 13:5–6 || Dan. 7:25; 12:11–12).
- The “beast” is instantly annihilated by fire (Rev. 13:7 || Dan. 7:21, 25; Rev. 19:20 || Dan. 7:11).
- The holy ones receive the kingdom and reign with Christ “for the age” (Rev. 20:4, 6 || Dan. 7:18).

Later in Revelation we will discover, just as the angel explained to Daniel in the latter part of Dan. 7:18, that the holy ones are not only going to reign for the inaugural age of the glorious reign of the Human One/Son of Man, but equally throughout “the ages of the ages.” In other words, they will reign for the first thousand-year age of God’s and Jesus Christ’s everlasting priestly kingdom on earth, and for every age thereafter without end (Dan. 7:18 || Rev. 20:6 || Rev. 22:5). The obvious conclusion from the tight parallels between the visions that God gave Daniel in Daniel 7 and John in Rev. 19:11–20:6 is that *they both reveal the same great judgment, which functions as the bridge between this age and the age to come.*

Rev. 19:11-21 and 20:4-6 *together* portray the famous “judgment of the living and the dead”¹ that puts a cap on the current age and inaugurates the reign of Jesus Christ and his holy ones. Those among the living who are found worthy will be selected to appear with Christ when he comes to reign (Rev. 3:4 || 19:7, 14); those among the dead who are found worthy will be selected for resurrection and given rulership with Christ (Rev. 20:4, 6). Those among the living who are found unworthy will be convicted by the testimony of Jesus Christ and slain (Rev. 19:21), which sends them to the underworld of Hades; those who are found unworthy among the dead will be left in Hades, and there they will wait for resurrection, together with those just now slain, “until the thousand years are over” (Rev. 20:5).

We saw that the devil’s long imprisonment in the abyss (Rev. 20:1-3) recalls the imprisonment of the “hosts of heaven on high” in “the pit” for many days in Isa. 24:21-22. In the same way, we see that resurrection is denied for the just-now-slain kings of the earth and their followers, along with all those among the dead who did not stand for the truth of God, “until the thousand years were over” (Rev. 20:4-5). This, as we have seen above, means that “the kings of the earth” are also imprisoned in the underworld “for many days” (Isa. 24:21-22). The scene in Rev. 20:4-6, in which resurrection is granted to the severely oppressed faithful but denied to the oppressors, also clearly echoes Isaiah’s unique prophecy in Isaiah 26. There, Isaiah prophesies refusal of resurrection for the persecutors when God establishes peace for those among the living who have faithfully honored God’s name (Isa. 26:12-15), and raises to resurrection life all those who have passionately yearned for and

¹ Mt. 16:27; 25:31-32; Acts 10:42; Rom. 14:11-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 4:5; Rev. 22:12.

worked for God's kingdom and God's righteousness, but who have perished in their efforts (Isa. 26:17-19).

That which Jesus clearly implies, when he speaks of "those who've been considered worthy to take part in that age, and in the resurrection from among the dead" (Lk. 20:35), this scene makes explicit. A judgment—which is to say, a trial—is going to be held, whose purpose is to determine who among the dead is to be given the privilege of taking part in the age to come—the age of incorruptible resurrection life. That glorious age of resurrection and rule for the holy ones, as John and Daniel agree, is only the first of an endless series of blessed ages. They will rule without end (Dan. 7:18, 21, 26-27; Rev. 20:4, 6; 22:1-5).

There is one difficult element in this section, which I feel obligated to say something about. John's vision in Rev. 20:4-6 seems only to leave a hair's breadth of room for anyone who does not die as a martyr.¹ He sees three possible groups selected for resurrection: (1) those who have been killed for "the word of God," which includes especially the OT prophets but also, potentially, anyone who dies because they stood up for the truth, (2) those killed because they bore witness to Jesus—which is to say, they lived as Christians and told others about him, and (3) those who refused to worship the beast and take his mark. The only way you can get any non-martyrs out of this list is (1) to assume that a certain number of the faithful survive the beast's attempts to kill all Christians, and so they are transformed at the Lord's coming rather than being resurrected as such (Mt. 24:30-31 || Mk 13:26-27 || 1 Cor. 15:50-53 || 1 Thess. 4:15-18 || Rev. 14:1-3?),² and/or (2) to assume that John sees the beast as in some sense always being in the world and demanding worship—in other words, at any time in "this evil age,"³ there is always going to be some manifestation of Daniel 7's beast calling for our worship, and the beast is always a mask for the devil. In that sense, if you live as one of those who are truly faithful to Jesus, and you refuse to join godless humanity in unconsciously worshiping the devil, who is "the god of this age" (Mt. 4:8-9; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 Jn 5:19), then even if you live and die before the last and final "beast" comes on the historical scene, you will be honored as one of those who refused to worship him. Assumption (2) is a pretty thin thread, though. Perhaps the safe approach is to take Jesus with complete seriousness when he says, "If any of you wishes to be my follower, you have to take up your cross and follow me" (Mt. 16:24 || Mk 8:34 || Lk. 9:23). From the way John has chosen to express himself in Rev. 20:4, it is very clear that John, like Jesus, does not want anyone to assume that following Jesus is going to cost you

¹ The word "martyr" is from the Greek (*martys*, Strong's #G3144), and means "a witness," one who testifies. But it typically connotes someone who dies for their testimony to Jesus Christ.

² John words Rev. 20:4 very cleverly so that he can mean, at the same time, "they lived and reigned..." and/or "they came to life and reigned..."

³ See Gal. 1:4, and notice the association between "this age" and the devil in 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 6:12.

anything less than your life. If your way of following Jesus always keeps you comfortable and safe, *you're probably not doing it right*. The one thing I *do not* think John is saying is that the martyrs alone, among all Christians who have died, rise to reign with Christ for the age to come. Why do I say that? Because (1) the thousand years begin when Jesus comes in glory, (2) Jesus repeatedly promises to give all his followers their reward when he comes, and (3) he repeatedly characterizes their reward as *reigning*.¹ Therefore Christ's coming in glory is the unique moment for *all the faithful*—martyred or not—to receive the reward of reigning with him.

Rev. 20:7-10

⁷And when the thousand years are over, Satan's going to be let out of his prison. ⁸He's going to go out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth: Gog and Magog.² He's going to gather them together for battle.³ They're as numerous as the sands of the ocean.⁴ ⁹And they came up, covering the breadth of the earth.⁵ They surrounded the camp of the holy ones, the Beloved City.⁶ And fire came down out of heaven⁷ and burned them up.⁸ ¹⁰And the devil, who was deceiving them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur—where both the beast and the false prophet are. They're going to be tormented day and night, forever and ever.

Who are these “nations at the four corners of the earth” (v. 7)? Haven't we just seen all of unrepentant humanity slain in the great Battle of Har-Magedon (19:21 || 6:15-17 || 11:18)? Who, after all, *could* be left on earth after the stars fall out of the sky, the sky splits apart and vanishes, and every mountain and island flee away (Rev. 6:13-14 || 16:20)? John has given us a simple and obvious verbal clue to the identity of the hordes of 20:8-9. In 20:3 he said that Satan was chained and imprisoned so that he “couldn't deceive the nations anymore, *until the thousand years were over*.” Then, in 20:5 he told us that those found unworthy of taking part in the “first resurrection” didn't come to life “*until the thousand years were over*.” Now, in 20:7-8, he says that “*when the thousand years are over*, Satan's going to be let out of his prison, and will go out to deceive the nations...” Satan's release—and his renewed license to deceive the unrepentant nations—coincides with their belated resurrection. Their “many days” of imprisonment together in the underworld—during which time

¹ Rev. 2:10, 26-28; 3:4-5, 11, 21; 11:15-18; 19:6-8, 14; 22:12-14.

² Prn. *gog* and *may-gog*. These are encountered in Scripture as vaguely known enemy nations that live far, far away from Israel. See Ezek. 38.

³ Or “for the war.”

⁴ Lit. “the sea.”

⁵ Lit. “And they came up upon the breadth [or the plain] of the earth.” See Hab. 1:6 for this imagery.

⁶ Lit. “and the Beloved City.” “And” here means “that is.”

⁷ Some mss add, “from God.”

⁸ See 2 Kgs 1:10; Ezek. 38; Isa. 26:11.

Satan was kept from being able to deceive them—have come to an end. Now he and they are on a rampage of mutual self-deception all over again. Just as Isaiah prayed in Isa. 26:11, John sees fire come down from heaven and devour them (Rev. 20:9).

If that weren't clear enough, John has given us a verbal cross-reference to make sure we understand the relationship between his and Isaiah's story of the end. Isaiah prophesies, before he relays the very last words of God (Isa. 27:2-5) to those who are granted release from the "pit" after many days of imprisonment,

Isa. 27:1

¹ In that day,
the LORD will punish with his sword—
his fierce, great and powerful sword—
Leviathan the gliding serpent,
Leviathan the coiling serpent;
he will slay the monster of the sea.

Ps. 74:13-14

When John describes his vision of the imprisonment of Satan in Rev. 20:2 above, he unmistakably points us to this passage when he says that the angel "grabbed the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan..." And just as the final end of those who are granted clemency in Isa. 26:10-11 and 27:2-5 comes when they attempt to bring an unprovoked attack on the community of God's beloved people, so it is in John's vision. The final, fiery end of the devil and the resurrected unrepentant comes when they, in league with one another, "surround the camp of the holy ones, the beloved city" (Rev. 20:9-10). John and Isaiah are absolutely in sync with one another.

This is a *totally different story* than the story that goes along with the doctrine of everlasting torment. In John's and Isaiah's story, God ultimately destroys those created beings, angelic and human, who prove themselves absolutely unwilling to repent and be reconciled. And the *reason* God destroys them is that if they are allowed to live and take part in creation, they present an active and deadly danger to their fellow created beings. This story is a corporate story, which reveals that the violence of the unrepentant multiplies when they band together in mutual delusion. Ultimately, those who set themselves in unyielding hostility *simply have to be removed*, in order to insure the protection of the children of God who live in love, who live in harmony with God and God's ways. The familiar story has God hauling everyone out of the grave to face a totally individual judgment based on people's everyday shortcomings, and throwing them, helpless, into a condition of never-ending torture. When you look at the story I have just given you and the popular "hell" story side by side, the doctrine of everlasting torment begins to make God look not like the loving and just Father of all, who looks like his Son Jesus, but like a cruel and implacable tyrant. It doesn't matter how long, how fondly, or by how

many people the doctrine of everlasting torment has been embraced. If the Scripture reveals that it is incorrect, *it is incorrect*. Let's review some other scriptures that we've looked at briefly before, now that we have Isa. 26:10-11, Isa. 26:20–27:1, and Rev. 20:7-10 fresh in our minds.

Isa. 66:22-24

²²“As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure. ²³From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,” says the LORD. ²⁴“And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

What is the context of the last verse of Isaiah, v. 24? It is the “new heavens and the new earth” (v. 22). And why does God create a new heavens and a new earth? As we have already seen from Isa. 24:19-20, 2 Pet. 3:3-13, Rev. 6:12-17, and Rev. 11:18, this present heavens (what we would call *the atmosphere*) and earth will someday become so wounded by human destructiveness that the entire ecosystem will have to be radically renovated—in a word, *resurrected*. Once again, this raises the question, “Where do they come from, these rebels against God, who will die *en masse* outside the walls of the New Jerusalem of the New Creation (see Isa. 55:17-18; 66:10-11, 10), their corpses food for consuming fire and maggots?” I can tell you what I think John would have said:

They cannot have survived the total collapse and resurrection of the heavens and the earth, therefore they cannot be ordinary mortals. *They must be the resurrected unrepentant*. This scene must be another revelation of the final judgment of those imprisoned and released ones whose end Isaiah saw in Isa. 26:10-11 and 26:20–27:1, and whose end I myself saw and narrated in Rev. 20:7-10. They must be those about whom Jesus spoke when he said, ‘Don’t be afraid of people who kill the body, but can’t kill the soul. Be more afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna’ ” (Mt. 10:28).

I will add for my own part—since I don’t know whether John ever got to read Hebrews—that these are also the ones the author of Hebrews talks about, whose sin, which brings about the total fiery end of Isa. 26:11, is *unrepentance and return to one’s former sins, in spite (literally) of God’s mercy in Jesus Christ*:

Heb. 10:27

²⁶Because if we sin deliberately after we’ve received the knowledge of the truth, there’s no sacrifice for sins left anymore. ²⁷There’s only the terrible

expectation of judgment, and “a furious fire that’s going to consume the enemies.”²⁸ If somebody defies the Law of Moses, they die without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.²⁹ But suppose there’s somebody who tramples on the Son of God. Suppose they treat as unclean the blood of the covenant—the blood that made them holy. Suppose they insult the Spirit of grace. How much worse punishment do you think such a person will deserve?

I have to admit that there *is* a theological sticking point to John’s and Isaiah’s story of the end of the unrepentant. Its problematic aspect is that it brings with it the painful idea that there are people (and angels) who *will never repent*, no matter what encouragement, what grace, what mercy they are given. That may be a shock to our view of humanity, but consider the alternative. Would you rather believe that God either (1) determines that he will never accept certain created beings, whom he has chosen to turn his back on before he ever created them, even if they do repent, or (2), having selected certain beings for rejection, withholds from them the *ability* to repent, and then *torments these pre-rejected ones without end*? For my part, I will rather justify God. I’m going to take these Scriptures to the bank (Mt. 6:19-21):

Ps. 145:8-9

⁸The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.

⁹The LORD is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.

Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11

²³Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?

³²I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

¹¹As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their way and live. Repent! Repent from your evil ways! Why should you die?

Jn 3:16

For God so loved the world¹ that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

¹ “The world” is a technical term in John’s Gospel and Epistles. It means *humanity living in alienation from God*.

1 Tim. 2:4

...God our Savior, who wants all people to come to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

2 Pet. 3:9

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you,¹ not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

As God tells us in another place (see Isa. 57:15-21, quoted on p. 91), the reason why “there is no rest for the wicked” has everything to do with their absolute stubbornness in unrepentance, and nothing to do with a lack of desire on God’s part for their reconciliation and healing.

I have one more closely related passage to share with you before we move on from Rev. 20:7-10. It’s a prophecy in Ezekiel 38 that John points us to when he speaks of “Gog and Magog” in Rev. 20:8. To understand this rather mysterious prophecy from John’s perspective, you have to start by understanding the immediate context out of which it arises. First, God gives Ezekiel a symbolic vision of the resurrection of the downtrodden faithful (Ezek. 37:1-14 || Isa. 26:12-19 || Rev. 20:4, 6). Then God gives him a prophecy with three promises: (1) the unity between the tribes of Israel will be restored and they will be brought back to the holy land from exile (Ezek. 37:15-23; see Rev. 7:1-8; 14:1-6); (2) Messiah, “my servant David,” will come, and under his everlasting rule they will have enjoy an everlasting covenant of peace, and will live forever in the land (Ezek. 37:24-26 || Isa. 26:1-4 || Rev. 20:4, 6; 22:4-5); (3) God’s sanctuary will be with them and God will dwell among them forever (Ezek. 37:27-28 || Rev. 21:3, 22; 22:1-3). Coming immediately out of that context we get the prophecy of Ezekiel 38:

Ezek. 38:1-17

The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of² Meshek and Tubal; prophesy against him ³ and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, Gog, chief prince of³ Meshek and Tubal. ⁴ I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws and bring you out with your whole army—your horses, your horsemen fully armed, and a great horde with large and small shields, all of them brandishing their swords. ⁵ Persia, Cush⁴ and Put will be with them, all with shields and helmets, ⁶ also Gomer with all its

¹ This “you” is plural.

² NIV translators’ note: Or ...*Magog, the prince of Rosh,*

³ NIV translators’ note: Or Gog, prince of Rosh,

⁴ NIV translators’ note: That is, the upper Nile region.

troops, and Beth Togarmah from the far north with all its troops—the many nations with you.

⁷ “Get ready; be prepared, you and all the hordes gathered about you, and take command of them. ⁸ **After many days you will be visited.**¹ In future years you will invade **a land that has recovered from war, whose people were gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate. They had been brought out from the nations, and now all of them live in safety.** ⁹ You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land.

¹⁰ “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On that day thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil scheme. ¹¹ You will say, “I will invade **a land of unwalled villages**; I will attack a peaceful and unsuspecting people—**all of them living without walls and without gates and bars.** ¹² I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and **the people gathered from the nations, rich in livestock and goods, living at the center of the land.**”² ¹³ Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all her villages³ will say to you, “Have you come to plunder? Have you gathered your hordes to loot, to carry off silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods and to seize much plunder?”

¹⁴ “Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: In that day, **when my people Israel are living in safety**, will you not take notice of it? ¹⁵ You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army. ¹⁶ You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land. In days to come, Gog, I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me when I am proved holy through you before their eyes. ¹⁷ “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: You are the one I spoke of in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel. At that time they prophesied for years that I would bring you against them.

In this passage, Gog, leader of a shadowy northern tribe not heard of since the early chapters of Genesis, collects together an enormous international coalition from all

¹ NIV paraphrases as “After many days you will be called to arms,” completely hiding the unique and virtually word-for-word parallel with Isa. 24:22. Verse 8 contains the very same four Hebrew words as Isa. 24:22: *min* (as a prefix, *m-*), “after,” Strong’s #H4480; *rob*, “many,” Strong’s #H7230; *yōm*, “day,” Strong’s #H3117; and *paqad*, “visit,” Strong’s #H6485.

² NIV translators’ note: The Hebrew for this phrase means the navel of the earth.

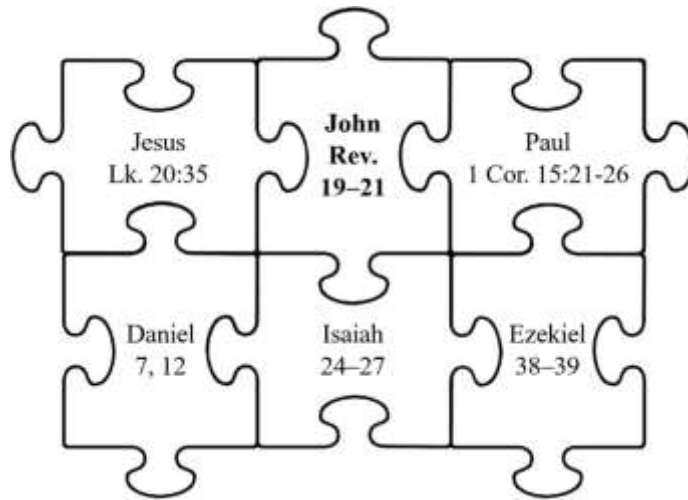
³ NIV translators’ note: Or her strong lions.

the far flung corners of the known world. When he arrives at the holy land, all is serene and harmonious under the kingship of Messiah (vv. 8, 14). Under Messiah, war has ended, and the citizens of Messiah’s kingdom have no need for fortifications of any kind; God is their protector (v. 11 || Isa. 26:1-3). They have been living in tranquility for a long, long time when Gog and his armies come, drawn there by God (vv. 4, 8). As soon as they arrive, Gog and his allies are immediately tempted with the idea of attacking the holy ones. To him, these people look defenseless—their land and all their possessions look ripe for the taking (vv. 10-12, 14). Who are Gog and his numberless hosts, who we see poised to attack the holy ones in the context of the peaceful and long-established kingdom of Messiah? The words “After many days you will be visited” (v. 8) give us a striking clue. They echo the almost exact same phrase in Isa. 24:22. God even tells us that Gog is the one whose coming was revealed to prophets who wrote in years gone by (v. 17), among whom the most famous is Isaiah himself. Exactly as in Isa. 26:10-11, Gog and his armies form an evil intention in the land of uprightness, and they have no idea that God is present, ready, and capable of defending his defenseless holy ones. God is going to send fire and sulfur down on him and burn him up (Ezek. 38:22 || Isa. 26:11 || Rev. 20:9-10). On top of all of these parallels, Meshek and Tubal, the warrior nations that Gog leads as “prince” (38:2), have already appeared in Ezekiel lying dead in the “pit” of the underworld (Ezek. 32:26 || Isa. 24:22)!¹

The punch line of all this? John understands his vision of the end of the devil and the hosts of Gog and Magog (Rev. 20:7-10) as revealing the same final judgment that God revealed in the prophecies of Isaiah 26–27, Isaiah 66, and Ezekiel 38. John himself understands, and takes care to give us clues so that we too will understand, that all four of these visions concern the resurrection and final judgment of all the unrepentant. It turns out that although each person entrusted with revelation about “the end” has his own unique viewpoint, their viewpoints match each other when

¹ The same Hebrew word, *bōr* (Strong’s #H953), is used in both these passages.

they talk about the same elements. They fit together closely, and they complement one another.



As I write this I feel for my readers. I keep thinking you are probably rubbing your temples and pinching the bridge of your nose about now. The material is so intense, so information-rich, that it must be kind of mind-boggling. But there's a reason why it's so intense: the Book of Revelation is the single most information-dense literary composition in all of ancient literature. It has more references to OT texts than it has verses, it is bursting with symbolism, and it is constantly making internal cross-references. Every scene is packed full of meaning, which has to be carefully excavated—and that in turn requires you to excavate and ponder multiple OT passages that John points you to. Interpreting Revelation takes a lot of work! And unless people do the work and do it with skill, they are going to make major mistakes in their interpretations of what he is saying.

Let's have a little change of pace for a second. I want you to reflect, to think about, all that you've been exposed to in these pages. Intense or not, has everything made sense? Have I backed up my interpretations with appropriate evidence? Has Scripture made my case for me at each stage of the game, or have I had to go on a wild goose chase to explain how my weird theory somehow fits with the text? Does it *feel* right, according to what you know about the character of God as revealed above all in Jesus Christ? If the answer to all these questions is *yes*, we're doing great together.

Do you remember back in Chapter 1, when I promised to show not only that the meaning Isa. 66:24, and Jesus' quotation of it, was totally different from the meaning assigned to it by the traditional idea of hell, but also that its meaning would reveal itself to be in harmony with God's loving and just character?¹ Well, we're

¹ See the conclusion to "Easy One #1," p. 17.

practically there already. We've seen that the main biblical sources of revelation about the ultimate fate of the unrepentant are not just harmonious with each other, but even clearly and closely linked with each other (see the illustration above). Of course, I'm not saying that everyone who prophesies reveals everything. For example, Jesus (in his earthly ministry) doesn't give more than a few hints of what's going to happen when the unrepentant are finally resurrected. And Daniel is never shown what is ultimately going to happen to the "beasts" that he sees disempowered but spared from final destruction "for a period of time" when the Human One appears (Dan. 7:12 || Isa. 24:21-22). But it makes sense that John, writing in awareness of the teaching of Jesus and the visions and oracles of all these other prophets, should reveal more about the future than any other single person—including Jesus himself. After all, as I pointed out already, John is conveying "the revelation of Jesus, which God gave to him to show to his servants" (Rev. 1:1). Jesus has more to reveal about the end of the world than the things he revealed in his earthly ministry.

Let's now move on to look at what most people think of as Revelation's "Last Judgment" scene. I'm going to give you an interpretation than you probably haven't been exposed to before. But again, the question to ask is not "How common is it?" but does it make good, solid sense of the actual words on the actual page of Scripture? Does it fit with, and tie together, the things we've already learned from John and Jesus and Daniel and Isaiah?

Rev. 20:11-15

¹¹And I saw a huge white throne, and the One who sat on it. From the presence of that One, earth and heaven had fled away, and there'd been no room found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, the powerful and the weak, standing in front of the throne. And books were opened. And another book was opened: the Book of Life. The dead were judged on the basis of the things written in the books—on the basis of their actions.

¹³And the ocean gave up the dead that were in *it*, and Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in *them*, and they were judged on the basis of their actions. ¹⁴And Death and Hades were thrown in the lake of fire. That's the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵If somebody wasn't found recorded in the Book of Life, they were thrown in the lake of fire.

We've already learned by reading Isaiah 24 (esp. vv. 19-20), 2 Peter 3:3-13, and Rev. 6:12-17 that the radical dissolution of this creation will attend God's (and Jesus Christ's) coming in glory as Judge of the Living and the Dead. We've seen that there is no possible way for any mortal person to survive the cosmic upheaval that attends that coming (Isa. 65–66; 2 Pet. 3). Therefore it makes immediate sense that Rev.

20:11—with its description of total cosmic dissolution—should open a vision of God’s and Christ’s coming in glory. That would link this scene with a number of passages. I think of

- Daniel’s vision of the Enthroned One coming as Judge and “the books” being opened in Dan. 7:9-10 (see Rev. 20:12 above)
- Jesus’ reference to his “glorious throne” when he comes as Judge in Mt. 19:28 and 25:31
- Terrified sinners pleading that the crumbling earth will hide them “from the presence of the One who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” in Rev. 6:12-17 (see also Rev. 16:20-21)
- The announcement that God and his Christ have come to judge living and the dead in Rev. 11:15-18, which is immediately followed (in 11:19) by the revelation of the heavenly Ark of the Covenant, which has always been a symbolic representation of God’s throne (see Exod. 25:22; 2 Sam. 4:4; 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16; Ezek. 1:4-28; 10:1-22)

Should we conclude from all this that Rev. 20:11-15 reveals the judgment of the unrepentant dead that happens at the coming of Christ? After all, we already saw the judgment of the unrepentant living in Rev. 6:12-17 and 19:14-21, and we saw the (vindicating, positive) judgment of the faithful dead in Rev. 20:4-6. So it makes sense that John might be given a vision that opens another aspect of the judgment of the dead, this time focusing on the judgment of the unrepentant. But this is where it gets tricky. John doesn’t actually say—as nearly all contemporary English translations of Rev. 20:11 mistranslate him as saying—that he saw God on his throne, and earth and heaven fleeing from him. He says, literally, “I saw a throne, great and white [or *shining*],¹ and the one who sat on it—he from whose presence earth and heaven fled away...” In other words, John is saying that he recognizes the One whom he now sees on the throne as *the One from whose presence he previously (in 6:12-14 and 16:20) saw earth and heaven flee*. That means that this scene cannot simply be taken as another vision of God coming as Judge at the end of this age (to supplement 6:12-17 and 11:15-19). By the same token, it also cannot simply be assumed to be a narration of something that happens after the final demise of Gog, Magog, and the devil in Rev. 20:7-10. As of the end of Rev. 20:11, this scene floats, as yet unmoored to any specific place on Revelation’s timeline. Nothing has happened yet. All we know at this point is *Who* John sees. We will have to figure out, by observing the action that follows and considering the internal logic of the

¹ Knowing that the Greek word *leukos* (Strong’s #G3022) means not strictly “white,” but *light, bright, brilliant, shining*, removes any tension between the appearance of God’s throne in this vision and its appearance in Dan. 7:10.

scene as a whole, *what* it represents as happening, and *when* it is to be understood as happening. So, what does John see next?

I saw the dead, the powerful and the weak, standing in front of the throne.
And books were opened. And another book was opened: the Book of Life.
The dead were judged on the basis of the things written in the books—on the basis of their actions.

This makes good sense. John has already seen the coming of God as King result in the vindication of all the faithful (whether living or dead) in Rev. 19:4-9, and he has seen the vindication of the faithful dead in Rev. 20:4-6. What has not yet been revealed—except very indirectly in Rev. 20:5—is a judgment scene that focuses on the judgment of the unrepentant dead that attends God’s and Christ’s coming. If this is what John is seeing, it stands to reason that the “books,” which record people’s conduct in their mortal lives, should be open (as in Dan. 7:10). It also makes sense that the Book of Life is open too. As we have seen consistently in our study, the decision that will be made when God and his Christ come in glory will be this: who is to be given the privilege of a place in the age to come, the age of everlasting life and of citizenship in the New Jerusalem, glorious Zion, capital of God’s reign (Isa. 24:23–25:10a; 26:1-4; 65:17-19; 66:1-14a). As John describes the New Jerusalem a little later in Revelation,

Rev. 21:27

And nothing unholy, or anyone that does filthy things, or any liar, is ever going to enter it—only those who are recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

The Book of Life, then, is the roll-book of the citizens of the New Jerusalem. Of course, we already know who belongs to that City. It is those who have been faithful to God and to Jesus Christ. When Jesus comes in glory, they will be granted the privilege of living and reigning with him for the thousand years (Rev. 20:4, 6) in “the Beloved City” (Rev. 20:9). Everyone else, “the rest of the dead” (20:5), will not be dealt with in a final way at that moment. The court determines that they are to be raised later, after the first thousand-year age in the endless reign of God, Christ, and the holy ones. We also know what happens when they *are* raised. They are judged again—this time they are evaluated as to their suitability for ongoing participation in the glorious and peaceful kingdom of Christ. On the basis of their actions as resurrected people (Rev. 20:8), they are devoured by fire, annihilated (20:9 || Isa. 26:11 || Isa. 27:4). And so in this scene John sees, after he sees the dead being judged for their deeds in mortal life, the next stage in their two-part judgment: their day of resurrection.

Rev. 20:13-15

¹³And the ocean gave up the dead that were in *it*, and Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in *them*, and they were judged on the basis of their actions. ¹⁴And Death and Hades were thrown in the lake of fire. That's the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵If somebody wasn't found recorded in the Book of Life, they were thrown in the lake of fire.

John sees all the subterranean realms of the dead (but not the realm above: see Rev. 6:9; 14:2-3) giving up their inhabitants, and he sees them judged by their actions. On the basis of *their actions in resurrection*, they are thrown in the lake of fire. This is, of course, pretty much exactly what John just saw in Rev. 20:7-10. And the result here—their being condemned to “the second death”—also maps very closely onto Rev. 20:9-10. It's not a coincidence that John said in Rev. 20:6 that those holy ones raised at the beginning of the thousand years would not be vulnerable to the “second death.” Those among the dead who were called forth to the second, delayed, resurrection *died again*—this time permanently and irrevocably. The lake of fire, pictured in Rev. 20:10 as a place of endless torment, is now (Rev. 20:14) interpreted as the place of annihilation. When the unrepentant are thrown into it, so also go Death and Hades. Now that death and the forces of death are no more, these obsolete holding-places are finally and permanently removed from the creation.

But what about the fact that Rev. 20:7-10 pictures the final end of the unrepentant as a battle, whereas Rev. 20:13-15 pictures it as a trial? Well, had you noticed that the glorious coming of God and Jesus Christ that brings an end to *this age* is *also* pictured first as a battle (Rev. 19:11-21) and then as a trial (Rev. 11:18; 20:4-6)? This revelation of the double character of judgment—as a conflict with the forces of evil and as a trial—goes all the way back to Daniel 7 (see Dan. 7:9-11, 21-22). And there is one more thing to notice.

Jer. 17:12

A glorious throne, exalted from the beginning,
is the place of our sanctuary.

Rev 4:2

And I saw¹ a throne standing in heaven. Someone was sitting on the throne.
³To look at, the One sitting on it was like a crystal of diamond, or carnelian.²

¹ “I saw”: Lit. “behold.”

² Lit. “a stone of jasper and carnelian.” These are both varieties of quartz. I think John reaches, for his description, for the most pure and precious clear gemstone known in his day.

Rev. 21:10-11

He showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem. It was coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹shining with¹ God’s glory.² The source of her light³ was like a priceless gem, like a crystal-clear diamond.⁴

God’s great and white—or shining—throne, in front of which the unrepentant dead, all the non-citizens of the New Jerusalem, are judged and consigned to annihilation in the lake of fire, *is the New Jerusalem itself.*

Rev. 21:1-4

And I saw a renewed heaven, and a renewed earth: the first heaven and the first earth had gone away, and the sea wasn’t there anymore. ²And I saw the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s home⁵ is with humanity, and he’s going to live with them. . . .and he’s going to wipe away every tear from their eyes. . . . ⁵And the One sitting on the throne said, “Look! I’m making everything new!”

John’s vision pictures the fulfillment of the Isaiah’s prophecy of a new heavens and a new earth (65:17-25; 66:22; see 2 Pet. 3:3-13). As we have seen above, Jesus and the great biblical prophets (including John) and the apostle Peter all agree that (1) the present age will come to an end with a great collapse of the created world, and (2) the new age of God’s (and his Messiah’s) reign will begin with a regeneration to incorruptible life of the creation—which includes the resurrection of the faithful. The apostle Paul also heartily agrees:

Rom. 8:18-23

¹⁸In my opinion, our current sufferings can’t even be compared with the glory that’s about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹Because the creation is really yearning for⁶ the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰After all, when the creation was subjected to human folly,⁷ it certainly wasn’t because it wanted to be. No, God subjected it⁸ in hope—²¹that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay, into

¹ “Shining with”: lit. “having.”

² See Isa. 60:1, 2, 19.

³ In other words, God, whose glory illuminates her. God has already been compared to a shining gemstone in Rev. 4:4.

⁴ Lit. “like an exceedingly costly gemstone of crystal-clear jasper” (i.e. quartz). Diamond is the most precious clear gemstone familiar to moderns; jasper filled that place in John’s day. Clear diamonds had not been discovered in John’s day.

⁵ Lit. “tent,” implying an intimate presence.

⁶ Lit. “For the earnest expectation of the creation is looking forward to.”

⁷ “Human foolishness”: or “vanity,” “emptiness,” “foolishness.”

⁸ Lit. “. . .by its own will, but by the will of the One who subjected it.”

the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation is groaning together, and going through labor pains together, right up to this moment. ²³And not only that: those of us who have the first harvest¹ of the Spirit groan within ourselves too. We're looking forward to our adoption, to the setting free² of our bodies.

When Jesus comes again, this world, this beautiful, “very good” world (Gen. 1:31), which God breathed into being in the beginning, will be free to revel in the unending and God-filled life that is its birthright. This is the moment that Jesus refers to when he talks about taking up his messianic throne in the “new creation” (literally, the re-Genesis) in Mt. 19:28.³ The new creation does not wait until after the thousand years are over, any more than the wedding day of the Lamb and his Bride is delayed for a thousand years after he comes again. The obvious moment for the wedding to happen is right when Jesus comes in glory. Three details confirm that Rev. 21:2 and Rev. 19:7-8 picture the same event:

- both passages describe the Bride as “prepared;”⁴
- there is a pleasing and clearly intentional symmetry between “his bride” in 19:7 and “her husband” in 21:2; and
- in each passage there is emphasis on the special beauty of the Bride on her wedding day.

Some people get confused over this for the simple reason that they expect Revelation to flow like a novel or a history book. But there is no basis for thinking that. Revelation is an apocalypse, a sequence of visions. My studies convince me that John has, by the end of the 20th chapter of Revelation, already seen Christ's coming in glory revealed in nine or ten different ways.⁵ If one is not stuck in the unjustified preconception that everything in Revelation has to be chronological, it is the most natural thing in the world for Rev. 21:1-4 to be yet another vision of this most profound of all future events. In conclusion, John is not contradicting Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, and Peter by interposing a whole age between Jesus' coming in glory and the new creation and his wedding day. All agree that the end of this age will see the demise of the living earth, but God's and Jesus' glorious coming will raise both the world and the faithful of all time, the Bride of Christ, to resurrection life.

I want to answer three last questions before we wrap up this chapter on Revelation 19–21. First, what does John mean when he says “the sea wasn't there anymore”?

¹ Lit. “the firstfruits,” i.e. the early harvest that was celebrated in the Jewish Festival of Booths.

² Lit. “redemption.” Paul's metaphor is that our bodies are in bondage to mortality, and that they are some day going to be purchased into freedom.

³ See p. 59 above.

⁴ The Greek word is *hetoimazō*, Strong's #G2090.

⁵ See Rev. 6:12-17; 7:9-17; 11:15-19; 14:14-16, 17-20; 16:17-21; 19:5-9 (audition); 19:11-21; 20:4-6; 20:12.

Most interpreters operate on the mostly unquestioned assumption that the visions in Revelation are chronological. Because of that, they think he’s talking about the earthly sea. They reason that the sea was there in Rev. 20:13, but death and Hades, the other two realms of the dead, were thrown into the lake of fire (20:14), so now we are belatedly hearing that the sea has been removed. This approach is not unreasonable, but I’m going to propose a better one.

You have seen that John’s Revelation shows an extremely close kinship with the Isaiah Apocalypse, Isaiah 24–27. Consider this description of the great banquet in Isaiah 25 (my translation):

⁷ On this mountain he will swallow up the covering:
the covering over all the peoples,
the woven cover that is stretched out over all the nations,
⁸ and he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces...

John clearly understands “this mountain” in v. 7 (see Rev. 14:1; 21:10) as Mount Zion of the new creation. Because of that, I think he understands the “covering” that God swallows up¹ as the blue dome of the sky, which, in biblical cosmology, is pictured as a kind of one-way glass barrier between the throne room of God (see Rev. 4–5) and humanity on earth. To us it usually appears blue or black; to those on the top side of it, it is clear like ice (Exod. 24:10; Ezek. 1:22; 10:1; Rev. 4:6).² Isaiah calls God “the One who is enthroned above the circle of the earth, who stretches the heavens out like a curtain, who spreads them out like a tent to live in” (Isa. 40:22). But when John looks up in Rev. 20:1-2, when he sees a new heavens and a new earth, the age-old barrier between us and God that Isaiah calls the “the covering” and the “tent” is gone. Where it used to be, John sees the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God! She used to be “the Jerusalem above” (Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:12), but now she is going to be the *shared home* of God and redeemed humanity *on the renewed earth*. Heaven and earth are no longer two; there is no longer any sea of separation. God will no longer be hidden behind the age-old curtain. The immediate reference in Rev. 21:3 to God’s “tent”³ now being on earth with human beings clinches the connection with Isa. 40:22, and the reference in Rev. 21:4 to God wiping away all tears, followed by the promise that death will be no more, clinches the connection with Isa. 25:7-8. These multiple connections make a

¹ This is a strong word that means God completely does away with it (as also in the following verse).

² Eliphaz the Temanite in the Book of Job rather sarcastically accuses Job of thinking that when the clouds are there, God can’t see us “as he walks around on the circle of the heavens” (Job 22:14).

³ Most English translations render the word “tent” (Gr. *skēnē*, Strong’s #G4633) in Rev. 20:3 as “dwelling,” understanding it to be metaphorical. But that obscures John’s allusion to Isa. 40:22.

strong case that the “sea” that John no longer sees is the great blue dome of the sky, the sea of glass.¹

A second question: If the new creation comes at the second coming of Jesus Christ, then what is the purpose of the millennium? I would say that as far as the faithful are concerned, the purpose of this first age of eternity is the same as the purpose of all future ages of eternity—to live and reign on the renewed earth with Christ to the glory of God. Just because John tells us that the holy ones “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev. 20:4), that doesn’t mean that they won’t also reign “forever and ever,” or literally, “for (or into) the ages of the ages” (Rev. 22:5). I have shown that the unique purpose of the thousand years concerns not the faithful, but the unrepentant. It is the age of their just imprisonment in the underworld, as punishment for behaving destructively in God’s creation. A closely related purpose of the thousand years is to unmask Satan, so that the unrepentant can clearly see that he is a liar (Rev. 20:3; see Isa. 14:9-11). When he and they are released from the underworld after the thousand years, none of them will have any more excuse for their actions on the basis that Satan deceived them.

One final question: How can God allow the unrepentant to experience the new creation? Doesn’t God foreknow that the unholy and the violent will only turn and attack the holy and the peaceful? Yes, he does. But this is a revelation of the extraordinary love and grace of God. According to a Christian reading of Genesis 1–3, God created humanity and gave us the gift of living in the pristine “pre-fall” creation, despite foreknowing that we humans would turn against him and the creation itself, even eventually destroying the living earth, our home (Gen. 6:5-13 || Isa. 24:4-6 || Rev. 11:18). God is sovereign, and it is his nature to lay opportunities for life in front of beings who are destined never to take advantage of them. We were created by the God who chooses to give his creatures a chance to taste life, even foreknowing that they will spit it out. His generosity towards all, deserving or (as in our case) undeserving, is his glory—to love and serve and extend patience to all, to the very last choice, to the very last invitation (Isa. 27:5).

¹ I would be less confident of this if there was some ready way of understanding death itself as “the cover” in Isa. 25:8. But that doesn’t make any particular sense.

Chapter 5

Passages in the New Testament Gospels and Epistles about the Final Fate of the Unrepentant

We've accomplished a lot in these last three chapters! We've worked very hard and built a solid foundation of knowledge about the major themes in biblical eschatology.¹ This knowledge is valuable in and of itself, and is not simply useful for understanding the issue of "hell." It will help you understand the Psalms and the Prophets, and it will help you understand everything that Jesus and the writers of the NT have to say about the future. But in particular, you're now in a position to read and understand everything that Jesus says about the future of the unrepentant. The crucial information that we have learned from our study together is that unrepentant mortals don't simply disappear when they die, nor do they go to a place of everlasting fiery torment. Jesus and the writers of the NT picture them as going to Hades, a holding place, until the day of judgment, when Jesus comes again in glory. At that judgment, the verdict will be that they are *unworthy* of resurrection and participation in the age to come (Lk. 20:35), so they will *remain incarcerated in Hades* for the first (thousand-year) age of God's and Christ's everlasting reign. After that age ("after many days," Isa. 24:22 || Ezek. 38:8 || Rev. 20:5, 8), they will be released from Hades and raised to bodily life once more for a "resurrection of judgment" (Jn 5:28-29), a judgment at which they will condemn themselves to final annihilation by attacking God's holy ones.

One of the main reasons people arrive at a doctrine of everlasting torment is that they have never become aware of this underlying sequence of judgment events. They force things together that don't belong together, and they leave pieces out of the puzzle because they have no idea where they fit. Now that we recognize the main puzzle pieces, and how they fit together, all the things taught by Jesus and the apostles of the NT are going to slot into place. All the biblical puzzle pieces are going to fit together snugly, making a self-consistent, biblically consistent, and theologically edifying overall picture. That's a whole lot more than can be said for

¹ The two themes I haven't concentrated on are (1) the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles in this age and the age to come, and (2) the great deception and persecution that is prophesied to come at the end of this age. For our purposes in this book, the only relevant facts about these two themes are (1) that the faithful Gentiles are invited into all the blessings of the age to come that are promised to the people of Israel, and (2) Jesus expects those who believe in him to remain loyal to him no matter what it costs, up to and including facing their death.

the traditional doctrine of hell. Let's get to work. It's going to be a lot easier than the previous chapter.

**Passages about “Crying and Teeth-Grinding”
(Traditionally, “Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth”)**

When we talked about Mt. 8:11-12 (“Simple One #3”) in Chapter 1, we saw that Jesus is talking about the emotional pain of being excluded from the life of the glorious age to come when he uses the phrase “crying and teeth-grinding.” Let's look at all of his similar sayings and satisfy ourselves that this sense is consistent across all of them.

Lk. 13:28-30 || Mt. 8:11-12

²⁸There's going to be crying and teeth-grinding out there, when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in God's Reign—and yourselves excluded outside.¹ ²⁹People are going to come from east and west and north and south, and they're going to be given a banquet² in God's Reign.

Neither this passage, nor in its parallel in Mt. 8:11-12, is there any suggestion whatever that everlasting hell-fire is the cause of the excluded people's crying and teeth-grinding. In this saying Jesus is referring specifically to Isa. 25:6-10³ and the wonderful banquet that Isaiah prophesies there. The LORD of Hosts is going to put this banquet on for all the faithful, Jewish and Gentile alike: “for all peoples” (Isa. 25:8 || Mt. 8:11 || Lk. 13:29). That's why people are going to come from all directions to “this mountain” (Isa. 25:7, 10a), which is to say, Mount Zion, the New Jerusalem (Isa. 24:23; 26:1-4 || Rev. 21:1-4), “the city of the Great King” (Mt. 5:35 || Ps. 48:2 || Isa. 24:23). As we saw when we looked at Rev. 19:6-9 in the previous chapter, the banquet is the wedding banquet of God's Son Jesus, the Messiah. But some people who thought they were going to be invitees are going to be *outside in the dark*. Inside there will be eating and drinking and singing with joy; outside only crying, anguish, and despair (Isa. 65:13-14). No wonder these folks are grinding their teeth. Like Moab in Isa. 25:10b, they're left swimming around in the cesspool of their own self-pity. Speaking of reading Isa. 25:6-10 as the (metaphorical) *wedding* banquet of Jesus, he himself just goes right there:

Mt. 22:2-14

²A king gave a wedding banquet for his son... ¹¹And when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who wasn't dressed in

¹ Lit. “kicked out outside.”

² Lit. “they're going to be made to lie down.” In those days, people lay on couches when they ate a formal meal. So it's the equivalent of “they're going to be given seats at the banquet.” Isa. 25:6-10.

³ See p. 81 above.

wedding clothes. ¹²He said to him, “Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?” But he couldn’t say a word.¹ ¹³Then the king said to the servers, “Tie his feet and hands, and throw him out there in the darkness. There are going to be people crying and grinding their teeth out there.” Because lots of people are invited, but few are chosen.

Jesus gives us all fair warning that those who live unworthily—professing Christian or not—will not be allowed to take part in the age to come. Those who have thought they were his friends, but didn’t live like it, are going to be sharply humiliated, they’re going to be frustrated, they may even—and this goes for all the “crying and teeth-grinding” sayings—be eaten up with envy. But above all they’re being tormented by the knowledge of a truth about themselves that they don’t want to know.

Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43 (The Parable of the Darnel Weeds/Tares)

²⁴Jesus gave them² another parable and said, “Heaven’s Reign is like a man who planted good-quality seed in his field. ²⁵But while people were sleeping, his enemy came, scattered darnel weeds³ in amongst the wheat, and went away. ²⁶When the plants grew up and bore fruit, then the darnel weeds showed up. ²⁷And the servants of the head of the house came up and said to him, ‘Sir, didn’t you plant good-quality seed in your field? So how come it has darnel weeds?’ ²⁸He said to them, ‘Some enemy of mine⁴ did this.’ And the servants said to him, ‘So, do you want us to go out and gather up the darnel weeds?’ ²⁹But he said, ‘No, otherwise in gathering up the darnel weeds, you’ll uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰Leave both to grow together until the harvest. At harvest time I’ll say to the harvesters, “First gather up the darnel weeds and tie them in bundles to be burnt. Then⁵ gather up the wheat into my bins.””

...

³⁶Then Jesus left the crowds and went back to the house. His followers came up to him and said, “Explain the parable of the darnel weeds in the field to us.” ³⁷He answered: “The one who plants the good-quality seed is the Human One, ³⁸and the field is the world. The good-quality seed is those who belong to God’s Reign.⁶ The darnel weeds are those who belong to the Evil One.⁷ ³⁹The enemy that scattered them is the devil. The harvest is the wrapping up

¹ Or “he had no excuse”; lit. “he was silenced.”

² Lit. “set before them.”

³ Darnel looks like wheat until it is full grown.

⁴ Lit. “An enemy person.”

⁵ Lit. “But.”

⁶ Lit. “the children of the kingdom.” It’s a figure of speech.

⁷ Lit. “the children of the Evil One.”

of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ⁴⁰So, just as dandel weeds are gathered up and burned, the same will happen at the wrapping up of the age. ⁴¹The Human One will send out his angels, and they'll separate out of his Realm all the people who trip people up, and those who go around acting lawless. ⁴²They'll throw them in the burning furnace. In there there's going to be people crying and grinding their teeth. ⁴³Then the people of integrity¹ are going to shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.² If anyone has ears, let them hear!"

Both Jesus and John the Baptizer repeatedly use the image of fire that burns up useless things to describe the fate of those who are removed from the earth in the judgment that brings this age to an end. Fire is a universal biblical symbol for *destruction*, and in this case it is the destruction of people's mortal, bodily life at the judgment. You can take your pick as to whether the "burning furnace" symbolizes (1) the literal burning up of the earth and the heavens that happens at that time (2 Pet. 3:10-13) or (2) Hades, the underworld prison to which the consciousness of the unrepentant go when their mortal bodies have been destroyed. It's no fun being dead if the only things you got out of being alive were power, pleasure, and privileged position. For the unrepentant, these things will be like a terrible burning itch from a missing limb that can never be scratched. We already saw in Chapter 1, when we looked at the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man ("Simple One #4," Lk. 16:19-31), that Hades can be (non-literally) pictured as a place of burning torment. We also get a hint that the prison of the underworld can be pictured as a "furnace" in Rev. 9:1-2.³ Notice that the underworld abyss is *locked* in Rev. 9:1-2, and requires an angel with a key to unlock it (see also Rev. 1:18; Rev. 20:1). There's not one word here about everlasting torment.

Mt. 13:47-50

⁴⁷Again, Heaven's Reign is like a fishing net that's thrown in the lake. It scoops up all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸When it's ready, it's dragged up on the beach, and they sit down and collect the good ones and put them in baskets. And they throw out the bad ones. ⁴⁹That's what it will be like at the wrapping up of the age. The angels will go out and separate out the evil people from among the people of integrity.⁴ ⁵⁰They'll throw them in a burning furnace. In there there's going to be people crying and grinding their teeth.

The principles for interpreting this parable are exactly the same as for the parable of the dandel weeds/tares. There's nothing here about everlasting torment.

¹ Traditionally: "the righteous."

² See Dan. 12:3.

³ Gr. *kaminos*, Strong's #G2575, used only in these two places in the NT.

⁴ Traditionally: "the righteous."

Mt. 24:45-51 || Lk. 12:41-46

⁴⁵So who is the reliable slave, the smart one? Suppose the owner has put the slave in charge of his household, to give out food to everyone at the right times. ⁴⁶The blessed slave is the one the owner finds doing that when he comes. ⁴⁷I'm telling you seriously: he'll put that one in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸But suppose the slave is bad, and says inwardly,¹ "My master is taking a long time." ⁴⁹And the person begins to beat the other slaves, and eat and drink with drunks. ⁵⁰That slave's master will come on a day they don't predict, and at a time they don't expect.² ⁵¹He'll cut that slave in two with the whip, and he'll put the person over with the play-actors. Over there, people are going to be crying and grinding their teeth.³

Mt. 25:14-30 || Lk. 19:11-27

¹⁴It's just like a man who is going out of town. He calls his slaves over and gives them responsibility for his properties. ¹⁵He gives five talents to one, he gives two talents to another, and he gives one talent to another.⁴ Each one gets an amount in line with their own ability. And he leaves town. ¹⁶Right away, the person with five talents goes and does business with them and makes another five. ¹⁷In the same way, the person with two makes two more. ¹⁸But the person with one talent takes it and goes off and hides it in the master's field. ¹⁹After a long time their master⁵ comes and settles accounts with them. ²⁰The person with five talents comes up to him and presents five more, and says, "Master, you gave me five talents. See, I've made five more talents." ²¹The master says, "Well done! You're a good and trustworthy slave. You've been trustworthy in charge of a few things; I'm going to put you in charge of a lot of things! Come in and celebrate with your master!"⁶ ²²Then the one with the two talents comes up and says, "Master, you gave me two talents. See, I've made two more talents." ²³The master says, "Well done! You're a good and trustworthy slave. You've been trustworthy in charge of a few things; I'm going to put you in charge of a lot of things! Come in and celebrate with your master!"⁷ ²⁴Finally the slave that received one talent comes up and says, "Master, I know you—you're a tough businessman. You harvest where you didn't plant, and you gather in places where you didn't scatter seed. ²⁵I was

¹ Lit. "But if that bad slave says in his heart."

² Lit. "know."

³ Luke's version doesn't mention crying and teeth-grinding, but only that the slave is severely whipped and put "with the unreliable ones" (v. 46)

⁴ A talent was unit of money that could be considered worth many thousands of dollars.

⁵ Lit. "the master of those slaves."

⁶ Or "Come, enjoy your master's approval!" Lit. "Come into your master's joy!"

⁷ See the nt. on v. 21.

afraid, so I went off and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have your money back.”¹ ²⁶But the master says back to him, “You bad, cowardly slave! You already knew that I harvest where I haven’t planted, and gather in places where I haven’t scattered seed! ²⁷So you should have put my money in the bank. That way,² when I came I would have gotten my money back with interest. ²⁸So take the talent away from him, and give it to the one who has ten talents. ²⁹As the saying goes,³ ‘Everyone who has will get more,⁴ and they’ll have more than enough. But the one who doesn’t have will even get what they have taken away from them.’ ³⁰Now⁵ throw that useless slave there in the darkness! There are going to be people crying and grinding their teeth out there.”⁶

One crucial warning lies behind all these passages that refer to crying and teeth-grinding: don’t take it for granted that you will be invited into the glorious Reign of God and Jesus Christ just because you know that Jesus is God’s Son. It’s not enough just to believe the right things about Jesus. You have to *follow* him (Mt. 7:24-27). This is the most important takeaway from all of Jesus’ sayings about “crying and teeth-grinding.” The rejection pictured in these sayings is horrifying, but it has nothing to do with God tormenting you—let alone tormenting you without end.

New Testament “Gehenna” Passages

We looked at two key “Gehenna” passages in Chapter 1 (“Simple One #1” and “Simple One #2”). We found that Jesus quotes Isaiah 66, which talks about fire and worms accomplishing the complete and final removal of corpses—corpses of those who attack the New Jerusalem in the setting of the new creation (Isa. 66:24). When you read Chapter 1, this idea of an *attack* probably seemed strange and out of place in relation to the idea of the final punishment of the resurrected unrepentant. That’s because in popular Christian culture, “the last judgment” and “hell” are conceived of as things that you are subjected to without your having any agency at all: you are passive and powerless, and they simply happen to you. But now we’ve become familiar with the powerful story of the end of the unrepentant shared by Isaiah 24–27, Isaiah 65–66, Ezekiel 37–38, and Revelation 19–21. In that story, Gehenna represents the place of instant, complete, and final destruction (annihilation), which is God’s response to, God’s judgment upon, people in the midst of an active and

¹ Lit. “See—you have what is yours.”

² Lit. “You should therefore have put it with the bankers, and.”

³ Lit. “For.” The master in the story appears to be quoting a proverb.

⁴ Lit. “to everyone who has will be given.”

⁵ Lit. “And.”

⁶ Luke’s version differs significantly from Matthew’s, and does not mention any punishment that happens to the slave who buries the money given him (cp. Mt. 25:28-30; Lk. 19:24-26). It’s not at all impossible that Jesus told his parables with different variations and elaborations from time to time.

violent rebellion. This story actually makes sense. Let's look at all the rest of the NT passages that mention Gehenna, and satisfy ourselves that they also conform to the idea of complete and final bodily destruction that we find in Isa. 66:24.

Mt. 5:21-22

²¹You've heard that it was said to people in olden times, "Don't murder,"¹ and that whoever murders will face² judgment. ²²But I say to you that anyone who's furious at a fellow human being will face judgment. Also, anyone that says "Fool!" will face the High Court.³ And anyone who says, "Stupid!" will face the fire of Gehenna.⁴

The sequence "Judgment...the High Court...Gehenna" in this saying is a figure of speech. It can be described as an *escalating parallelism*. The obvious implication about Gehenna is that it is the worst thing that can happen to you—and of course we're all agreed on that already. But one more thing. What is it about calling somebody *stupid*, or *fool*, that is so bad? All the learning we've done actually contains the answer to this question. It's not a matter of God being such an implacable perfectionist that even a little thoughtless word will get you fried forever. It's that the habit of mind that despises your fellow human beings, regards them as worthless, is the habit of mind that ultimately results in Gehenna. Those who end up in Gehenna are those who, no matter how religious they may have been in their mortal lives, never valued and respected their fellow human beings. So it's easy for the devil, that hater of everyone but himself, to delude them into a fine state of self-righteous violence at the end (Isa. 26:9-11 etc.). They haven't learned the most fundamental law of existence as a created being: love and respect your fellow created beings as yourself. So they don't play well with others, and it's ultimately going to cost them everything. The punchline: the appropriate time to repent of hating and despising and judging others is *now*.

Mt. 10:28 || Lk. 12:4-5

²⁸ Don't be afraid of people who kill the body, but can't kill the soul. Be more afraid of the One who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna.

⁴ And I'm saying to you friends of mine, don't be afraid of those that can kill your body, but after that there's nothing more they can do. ⁵ I'll show you who you should be afraid of—be afraid of the One who, after killing you, has the authority to throw you in Gehenna.

¹ Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17.

² Lit. "will be liable to," and similarly below.

³ Lit. "Sanhedrin." This was the native law-making body and high court of the land under the Roman occupation.

⁴ Prn. *ge-henn-a*.

We already looked briefly at this pair of passages in Chapter 3.¹ As we saw there, one thing that is made explicit in Luke's version of this saying is that there are two phases of divine punishment: God can remove you from bodily life (i.e. God can kill you, sending your soul to Hades), and then, beyond and in addition to that, God can consign you to Gehenna. We've seen in the previous two chapters how it works out that there should be two phases of judgment and punishment for the unrepentant. First they die as mortal human beings (as John saw in Rev. 19:21), and second, they lose their resurrected life (as John saw in Rev. 20:7-9, 13-15). The fiery destruction of body and soul in Gehenna corresponds to the second phase, which John calls "the second death" (Rev. 20:6, 14). This phase of destruction is final, total, and irreversible.

Mt. 5:29-30 || Mt. 18:6-9 || Mk 9:43-48²

^{5:29}If your right eye trips you up, take it out and throw it away from yourself. After all, you are better off losing one body part—rather than your whole body being thrown into Gehenna. ³⁰And if your right hand trips you up, cut it off and throw it away from yourself. Again, you are better off losing one body part, rather than your whole body going into Gehenna.

^{18:6}But whoever trips up one of these little ones who have faith in me—it's better for that person to have an upper millstone hung around their neck and be drowned way out in the ocean. ⁷(It's going to be horrible for this world because of the things that trip people up. But it's going to be really horrible for the person responsible for tripping others.) ⁸And if your hand or your foot trips you up, cut it off and throw it away from you. It's better for you to come into life maimed or with a disability, rather than having two hands or two feet to be thrown into the age-long fire. ⁹And if your eye trips you up, take it out, and throw it away from you. It's better for you to come into life one-eyed, rather than to get thrown with two eyes into the fire of Gehenna.

^{9:43}And if your hand trips you up, cut it off. It's better for you to go into life with a disability³ than to have two hands, and go into Gehenna—into the fire that can't be put out.⁴ ⁴⁵And if your foot trips you up, cut it off. It's better for you to go into life with a disability than to have two feet, and get thrown into Gehenna. ⁴⁷And if your eye trips you up, tear it out. It's better for you to go into the Reign of God with one eye, than to have two eyes, and get thrown

¹ See p. 71 above.

² Mark's version of this saying closely parallels Matthew's, but with a couple of significant differences, which will be considered immediately after the Matthew version.

³ Or "maimed."

⁴ The oldest mss do not contain vv. 44 and 46, each of which repeats v. 48.

into Gehenna—⁴⁸where “their worm doesn’t die, and the fire doesn’t get put out.”¹

These three different versions of what looks like the same basic saying may well be evidence that Jesus used this saying often, using different variations from occasion to occasion as he saw fit. What accounts for the difference between the two versions we have in Matthew? Aside from general variations in expressing the same proverb, it seems likely that in the variation we have in Mt. 18:8-9, Jesus uses a threefold escalating parallelism that goes from bad, to worse, to worst possible, just as we saw in Mt. 5:21-22 above. It’s bad to be drowned in the deep sea; it’s worse to go into the age-long fire of Hades; it’s the worst thing possible to be utterly destroyed, body and soul, in Gehenna.

Only two other passages in the NT have the expression, “age-long fire”: Mt. 25:41, which we will look at in detail below, and Jude 1:6-7. We’ll have a look at them in just a moment. In the meantime, let’s finish our look at all the NT Gehenna passages.

Mt. 23:15, 33

¹⁵It’s going to be horrible for you, scripture experts and Pharisees—you play-actors! Because you travel all the way around the sea and the desert to make one convert, and when the person converts, you make them twice as much a child of Gehenna as yourselves. . . .³³Snakes! Offspring of poisonous snakes! How will you get away from the sentence of Gehenna?

Jesus is saying that unrepentant scripture experts and Pharisees convert people to belief in God, only to train them in thinking that is completely against God, and this leads both them and their trainees on a path towards ultimate destruction. This principle is far from being a uniquely Jewish thing. It can equally be applied to many Christian preachers and teachers.

Jas 3:5b-6

^{5b}Look what a small fire it takes to start a big forest burning! ⁶And the tongue *is* a fire! It’s a world of bad behavior. It sits there among the parts of our body, polluting the whole thing. It sets one’s whole life² on fire—and *it’s* set afire by Gehenna.

James compares the destructive potential of the tongue to the match that starts a whole raging forest fire. With all of our modern technology, we still have a very incomplete ability to cope with forest fires. But in James’s day, there was not a single thing you could do to stop them or even slow them down. In the same way, one ill-

¹ Isa. 66:24.

² Or “It sets the cycle of nature.”

considered word can set off a terrible chain reaction of trouble, and even deadly consequences. James's use of Gehenna fits perfectly with what we've already learned. The core idea of the biblical concept of Gehenna is *a destruction that cannot be stopped*. If Gehenna were symbolic of hell as a chamber of everlasting torture, James's reference to Gehenna here would be strange and ill-fitting.

To summarize this set of passages, neither this nor any of the other biblical statements about Gehenna suggest anything about torment at all, let alone everlasting torment. Here's an illustration to think about: *If* Jesus understood and taught Gehenna as a place of everlasting torment, it would have been the most natural thing in the world for him to use the image of people "crying and grinding their teeth" in Gehenna sayings. The two things *never* go together in the same saying. The fire and maggots of Gehenna dispose of corpses. There's nobody around to torment.

Passages That Picture a Long Period of Imprisonment

Mt. 5:23-26 || Lk. 12:57-59

²³ Suppose you are just bringing your offering¹ to the altar, and right there you remember that your fellow human being has something against you. ²⁴ Leave your gift there in front of the altar! Go, get reconciled with the person! Then, come back and offer your gift. ²⁵ Be quick, make amends with the person who has a complaint against you,² while you are both on the way to court. Otherwise the person will turn you over to the judge. The judge will then turn you over to the bailiff, and you'll be thrown in prison. ²⁶ I'm telling you seriously: you are *not*³ going to get out of there until you've paid back the last cent!

There are two key ideas in this saying. The first is that God has no interest in religious service that is not attended by right treatment of others (Isa. 58:6-7; Amos 5:21-24). The second is that *the time to repent and make amends is now*. In addition to these two central points, Jesus strongly implies that the debt that we incur when we treat others wrongly is far greater than most of us imagine. On the other hand, he specifically talks in terms of the debt and the term of imprisonment being *finite* (as in Isa. 24:21-22 and Rev. 20:5). Everlasting torment does not fit well here, because in the doctrine of everlasting torment, there is no getting out, ever. If you talk to someone about this saying who teaches everlasting torment, they will probably say that that Jesus is using a parable here, and you can't take parables literally. You can nod enthusiastically at this point. You've found a point of agreement! Now you can talk about the dramatic biblical pictures of the undying maggot and the volcanic

¹ Or "gift."

² Lit. "your opponent at law."

³ Lit. "you will not—will not—." In reading, this word should be emphasized.

caldera (the lake of fire), and the important business of how to determine when to take things literally and when not to. In the following chapter, “The Hard Ones,” I’m going to give you five strong, clear, and obviously reasonable principles for making this kind of determination. And they’re all going to be on your side.

Mt. 18:21-35

²³...Heaven’s Reign is like a king who wanted to sort out the accounts with his servants. ²⁴But at the beginning of the accounting one man was brought to him who owed ten thousand talents.¹ ²⁵And since the man couldn’t pay, the king commanded for him to be sold—along with his wife and children and everything he owned—to pay back the debt. ²⁶So the servant falls down in front of him and says, “Be patient with me, and I’ll pay it all back to you!” ²⁷The king felt sorry for that servant, and let him off and forgave the loan.

²⁸But when that servant left, and he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,² he grabbed him and started to choke him. “Pay back all of what you owe me!” he said. ²⁹So the fellow servant fell down and begged him: “Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back!” ³⁰But he wouldn’t. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into jail until he paid back the debt.

³¹So when his fellow servants saw the things that had happened, they felt terrible. They went to their king and laid out³ all the facts. ³²Then the king called him in and said to him, “You evil servant! I forgave you that entire debt when you begged me to. ³³Shouldn’t you have been merciful to your fellow servant, just as I was merciful to you?” ³⁴His king was furious. He turned him over to the torturers until he paid back everything he owed. ³⁵That’s just how my heavenly Father is going to treat you, if each of you doesn’t forgive your fellow human beings⁴ from the heart.

The amount of money that the fellow in the parable has embezzled, 10,000 talents, or about 700,000 pounds of silver, is a truly mind-boggling sum. On today’s silver market, that might be worth about 400 million dollars. This man is a high-stakes wheeler and dealer, who has managed to skim over a half a billion dollars from the king’s enterprises. The same spirit of greed and stinginess that made him an embezzler in the first place now makes him both ungrateful the grace he has received and harsh and merciless to someone who owes him a modest debt—in today’s terms, something like a few hundred dollars. Now that the king has changed his mind, the

¹ This is in the realm of tens of millions of dollars.

² Pm. *din-nahr-ee*. A denarius was a standard day’s wage. So we’re talking about the equivalent of a few hundred dollars.

³ Lit. “clarified.”

⁴ Lit. “your brother.”

man is going to have to pay it all back—all the land and fancy houses and luxurious possessions and slaves and whatnot are all going to be sold off. That'll pay a good portion of the debt, but of course he and his family will have consumed a fair portion of the value. All the family members who lived like royalty, waited on hand and foot, are now going to be sold, their social position turned upside down. And the man himself is going to be tortured until he gives up the location of every asset, down to the last little cache of coins that he has hidden away for such a day as this.

It's a horrifying story, but the point is not hard to understand. Everyone has been forgiven vastly more than they realize, and no one has the option of going through the door of grace and shutting it behind them. It is crucial not to overlook the fact that Jesus is addressing *his own followers*. He's not talking about those bad folks over there, who are going to hell. He's talking about us Christians, who have experienced a huge gift of forgiveness. He's saying that we *must* extend to others the forgiveness we have received, or our own debt will not remain forgiven. Strict as that may sound, those are the explicit terms of the New Covenant. Jesus elsewhere teaches this directly and without parables or figures—see Mt. 6:12, 14-15; 7:1-2; Mk 11:25; Lk. 6:37.

Is there anything here about a hell of everlasting torture? Once again the answer is no. Unless you are going to cherry-pick which of the elements of the story you are going to take more, rather than less, literally, the implication is that the man's debt is huge and his imprisonment is going to be very long (and painful), but both are finite.

The conclusion as to Jesus' parables about a long imprisonment is that you can't get a doctrine of everlasting torment out of them. To the extent that you try to push them towards some kind of literalism at all, these parables fit far more naturally with the end-times story of Isaiah and Revelation, in which all the unrepentant (which includes people who thought they were Christians but didn't forgive others as they had been forgiven) are sentenced to serve a term of "many days" or "a thousand years" in the prison of the underworld.

Passages Involving Judgment with Fiery Results for the Unrepentant

Mt. 25:31-46, esp. 41

³¹When the Human One comes in his glory, all his angels will be with him too. Then he's going to sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations are going to be assembled there in front of him. He'll sort them out from one another, just like a shepherd sorts the sheep out from the goats. ³³He'll put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴Then the King will say to the ones on his right, "Come, all of you who have my Father's blessing! Come inherit the

Reign that has been prepared for you ever since the creation¹ of the world!
³⁵Because I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink; I was a foreigner,² and you welcomed me in; ³⁶I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you looked after me; I was in prison, and you came to visit me.” ³⁷Then the people of integrity³ will say back to him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? ³⁸When did we see you as a foreigner and welcome you in, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison, and come and visit you?” ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, “I’m telling you seriously: whatever you did for the most insignificant one of my brothers and sisters here, you did it for me.” ⁴¹Then he will say to the ones on his left, “Get away from me, all of you cursed ones! Go away into the age-long⁴ fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

⁴²Because I was hungry, and you didn’t give me anything to eat; I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me anything to drink; ⁴³I was a foreigner, and you didn’t welcome me in; I was naked, and you didn’t clothe me; I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t look after me.” Then those ones will also say back to him, ⁴⁴ “Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or as a foreigner, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and not serve you?” ⁴⁵Then he will say to them, “I’m telling you seriously: whatever you didn’t do for the most insignificant one of my brothers and sisters here, you didn’t do it for me either.” ⁴⁶And that group will go off into age-long punishment. But the people of integrity will go off into age-long life.

This passage used to be called the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, but now it’s more commonly known as the Judgment of the Nations. In this teaching Jesus clearly refers to the world judgment that inaugurates the Reign of God in Isa. 24:21-23. Let’s look at the main elements.

The Great Judgment

In the scene that Jesus paints, we see the great judgment that inaugurates the glorious Reign of God and his Messiah, Jesus Christ (Mt. 25:31 || Mt. 24:30-31). Just as we’ve seen in so many other passages, the issue that will be decided in the judgment is *who is worthy to take part in the glorious Reign of God, which has now arrived in its fullness*. Some (the “sheep”) are invited in, because *they have behaved as disciples of Jesus* (vv. 34-40). Others (the “goats”) are sent away in confusion and shame because they have *not* behaved as disciples of Jesus (vv. 41-45). The crucial

¹ Lit. “foundation.”

² Or “a stranger,” and so throughout this parable.

³ Traditionally: “the righteous,” here and in v. 46.

⁴ Traditionally: “eternal,” here and in v. 46.

difference between the sheep and the goats is that the sheep have treated their neighbors with love and compassion, as Jesus showed and taught them to do. The goats have lived self-centered lives, ignoring the plight of their brothers and sisters who suffer. At this judgment, the criterion on which one is invited in or sent away—as always in the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament as a whole—is behavior, not belief. No one is accepted or rejected on the basis of narrowly religious things like beliefs or attendance of worship services: everyone is evaluated on the basis of *how they've treated their fellow human beings*.

Co-Imprisonment of Unrepentant Human Beings and Angels

The goats are sent away to “the age-long fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41). As we know from both Isa. 24:21-22 and Rev. 20:1-5, the transition to the coming age will see unrepentant human and angelic beings stripped of their agency within creation and punished by imprisonment *together* in the underworld for the entire coming age. The “age-long fire” refers to that age-long condition of complete and miserable powerlessness. The situation in the age to come is pretty much the same between unrepentant angels and human beings. We human beings have been created with physical bodies, which are our means of existence on the earth and our vehicle for expressing our agency in the creation. Angels have been created with their own means of expressing their agency in the creation, which, while not explained in Scripture, is clearly different from ours. Nonetheless, their situation becomes equivalent to that of human beings when they are shut up in the underworld: both angels and humans are deprived of any power to exert influence of any kind on the creation. In effect, imprisoned angels are *just as dead as mortal humans who die*. Is there somewhere else in Scripture that we can find the idea that angelic beings are going to be stripped of their agency in creation at the coming judgment? Indeed there is:

Psalm 82

- ¹ God presides in the great assembly;
he renders judgment among the “gods”:
- ² “How long will you¹ defend the unjust
and show partiality to the wicked?²
- ³ Defend the weak and the fatherless;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.
- ⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.
- ⁵ “The ‘gods’ know nothing, they understand nothing.

¹ NIV translators’ note: The Hebrew is plural.

² NIV translators’ note: The Hebrew has *Selah* (a word of uncertain meaning) here.

They walk about in darkness;
 all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
⁶ “I said, ‘You are “gods”;
 you are all sons of the Most High.’
⁷ But you will die like mere mortals;
 you will fall like every other ruler.”
⁸ Rise up, O God, judge the earth,
 for all the nations are your inheritance.

Psalm 82 is composed of a vision (vv. 1-7) followed by a prayer that God will come and judge the earth (v. 8). The vision-scene takes place in God’s heavenly, angelic council. Glimpses of this council appear occasionally in the OT (Gen. 3:22; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; 2 Kgs 22:19 || 2 Chron. 18:18; Dan. 7:9). In this psalm, we see God severely reprimanding those members of the angelic council who favor the wicked on earth rather than standing up for the poor and the vulnerable. Note the connection with Mt. 25:41-43. God refers to the angels both as *’elohīm*,¹ “gods” (v. 1), and as “sons/children of God” (v. 6). Like us (Gen. 1:26, 28), the angels have been given important roles in the management of God’s creation. And also like us, some of them have done just about the opposite of what they were commissioned to do.

And what is the consequence of this unjust and heartless behavior on their part? Verses 5-7 mention three consequences: (1) the foundations of the earth are going to be violently shaken, (2) unjust angels are going to be consigned to wander in the darkness, and (3) they will “die like mere mortals.” If the idea of the shaking of earth’s foundations has a familiar ring, that is probably because you read about it above in Isa. 24:18-19.² The same three Hebrew words are used: earth, foundations, violently shake.³ And of course, two verses later in Isaiah we read about the co-imprisonment of wicked angelic and human beings (Isa. 24:21-22). Throughout the OT, Sheol is pictured as the shadowy and formless underworld. Even the most exalted among human beings—kings and emperors—end up there when they die (see esp. Isa. 14:3-21; Ezek. 32:17-32), no better off at the end than anyone else. In the same way, God is going to remove destructive angelic beings from all participation in the creation. They will be consigned to the formless underworld, subjected to complete powerlessness and lifelessness, “just like mortals...like any prince” (v. 7).

¹ Strong’s #H430.

² See p. 78 above.

³ These words are *’eret* (Strong’s #H776), *mowcad* (Strong’s #H4144), and *mowt* (Strong’s #H4131). In Isa. 24:8 another word for shake is used: *ra’ash* (Strong’s #H7493).

“Age-Long Fire,” Age-Long Punishment,” and “Age-Long Life” (Mt. 25:41, 46)

This subject is somewhat complicated, and there is no way to explain these verses accurately without facing up to some of this complexity. There are three reasons why it’s complicated: (1) the Jews of Jesus’ time (including Jesus and his apostles) thought about time and eternity differently from the way modern Western people think about it, (2) in the Greek language, the language of the NT, ideas like eternity and everlastingness are expressed in a completely different way than in English, and (3) most English translations of the NT have not only masked these two differences, but they have also muddied the waters by translating words relating to time and eternity inconsistently from one instance to another. An obvious and glaring example appears in the passage we are discussing. The KJV translates Mt. 25:46,

These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

The KJV translates the Greek adjective *aiōnios*¹ as “everlasting” in its first occurrence in this verse, then as “eternal” in the second occurrence. We’re going to have to do some Greek word study in order to straighten this out. First of all, the adjective *aiōnios* is formed from the noun *aiōn*. The word *aiōn* means “age,” so *aiōnios* ought naturally to mean something like “age-long,” or “characteristic of the age.” We learned in Chapter 2 that the Jews (including Jesus and the writers of the NT) did not divide things up into “time” and “eternity,” or “this age” and “the eternal state,” but rather into an indefinite number of past ages, the present age, and an indefinite number of future ages. For example:

Jude 1:25

²⁵Glory, greatness, power, and authority to the One God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord—from before all ages, and now, and to all ages.²

For Greek-speaking Jews, describing a certain state of affairs as *aiōnios* often didn’t mean that it would last forever without end. In some contexts it meant that it would last for someone’s lifetime.³ In other contexts, referring to the past, it meant that something was “ancient,” or “from long ago.”⁴ Or it might equally be used to

¹ Strong’s #G166, from *aiōn*, “age,” Strong’s #G165.

² There are 18 doxologies to God in the NT that contain the word *aiōn*, and every single one of them wishes blessing or praise upon God throughout a plurality of future ages. Even though the Greek phrase *eis aiōna* is usually translated as “forever,” it is never used in a NT doxology. Why? Because it’s not strong enough. It means for the whole age.

³ For example, see Phlm. 1:15 (Paul here using *aiōnios* adverbially, “have him back forever,” and alluding to a similar [lifetime] use of *eis ton aiōna* in Deut. 15:17 LXX).

⁴ See Ps. 23:7, 9 LXX, *pulai aiōnioi* “ancient gates”; Ps. 75:5 LXX, *apo oreōn aiōniōn*, “from ancient mountains”; Ps. 76:6 LXX, *etē aiōnia* “years of the distant past”; Isa. 63:11, *emnēsthē hēmerōn aiōniōn*, “he remembered ancient days”; Odes of Solomon 4:6, *bounoi aiōnioi*, “ancient hills”; Rom. 16:26, *cronoi aiōnioi*, “ancient times”; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:2, *pro cronōn aiōniōn*, “before the ancient ages.”

indicate that something would last for the rest of *this* world and *this* age.¹ Correspondingly, if the thing being described as *aiōnios* belongs to the age to come, it could be expected to last for the whole of that age. But it might simply be something *characteristic of or belonging to* that age, whether it lasted longer or shorter than that age.²

If we want to feel completely confident that *aiōnios* in Mt. 25:41, 46 means something like “for the age,” and doesn’t simply mean “everlasting,” it would be great to have an example in an equivalent context where it specifically and clearly means “for the age.” We’re blessed to have just such an example in *4 Maccabees*, a popular Jewish sermon very possibly written during the lifetime of Jesus. In fact, it appears that Jesus actually quotes from it.³ In *4 Macc.* 12:12, not only do we have *aiōnios*, but also a reference to *fiery punishment* described as *aiōnios*. In the story that the author is telling, the youngest of seven brothers has just witnessed all six of his older brothers being tortured and burned to death by an evil king because they have refused to give up their Jewish faith. When the king threatens the youngest brother with being burned alive just like his elder brothers, he stands firm in his faith, and defiantly says to the king:

because of these [crimes], divine justice is going serve you up to⁴ a more concentrated and age-long (*aiōnios*) fire, and to tortures that will not release you for the whole age.⁵

What is a fire that is *aiōnios*? The boy’s next words tell us exactly what it is. It’s a fire that will torment the evil king “for the whole age.” Let’s compare Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:

41 “Get away from me, all of you cursed ones! Go away into the age-long (*aiōnios*) fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

¹ See Jude 1:7, talking about the permanent [in this age] destruction of Sodom; Eccl. 1:4 LXX, where generations come and generations go, but the earth always remains, in this age.

² See 2 Thess. 1:9, which refers to “eternal (*aiōnios*) destruction.” Paul certainly does not mean that the destruction he is describing takes forever, or even a whole age, to complete. Those destroyed at the coming of Jesus in glory are instantly slain by fire, and their destruction *has effect* for the whole coming age. See also Heb. 6:2, which speaks of “eternal (*aiōnios*) judgment.” The judgment the author is referring to doesn’t last for the whole coming age, but rather belongs to that age, and has consequences that endure for the whole age. And of course *zoē aiōnios*, “eternal life,” is the characteristically immortal life that belongs to the age to come (Mt. 25:46; Lk. 20:35-36; Jn 12:25), but which is sometimes (in the writings of John) talked about as something that one can possess in this age (Jn 3:36; 5:24; 6:47, 54; 1 Jn 3:15; 5:11).

³ Compare: “But that the dead rise—Moses revealed that in the passage about the burning bush, when he says, ‘the Lord, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’ Now, God is certainly not the God of the dead, but of the living. Because everyone lives to God” (Lk 20:37-38); “...believing that to God, they [those being martyred for their faith] aren’t dying, but just like our patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they live to God” (*4 Maccabees* 7:19). Of course, it is not impossible that it is the author of *4 Maccabees* who is quoting Jesus!

⁴ Or *reserve you for*.

⁵ *4 Macc.* 12:12.

⁴⁶And that group will go off into age-long (*aiōnios*) punishment.

What age is Jesus talking about? The age to come, the first great age of his and his Father's (and his faithful ones') reign on earth. This judgment, in fact, is the first official act of his reign. It's the first thing he is going to do when he comes in glory to "sit on his glorious throne" (Mt. 25:31 || Mt. 19:18). Of course, his reign endures not only "for the age," but also "for the age(s) of the ages"; and the same can be said for the life of the faithful ones (Dan. 7:18; Rev. 11:15; 20:4, 6; 22:5). But Jesus is not specifically affirming the "everlastingness" of the life of the faithful in this saying as such. He is affirming that they will be invited to take part in the life of the age to come: "they will go off into *aiōnios* life." While they are experiencing life for that age, the unfaithful will be experiencing punishment for that age. What comes after, we only learn in Isaiah and Revelation.

In conclusion, in the Judgment of the Nations teaching of Mt. 25:31-46, Jesus doesn't tell us that the goats go away into everlasting fire and everlasting punishment. He says they go away into age-long fire and age-long punishment. And that is what Isaiah 24 and Revelation 20 also tell us. Let's look at some more passages:

Jn 15:6

⁶If a person doesn't remain in me, they get thrown away as a branch and dry up. And the workers gather up the dead branches¹ and throw them into the fire, and they get burned up.

This looks a whole lot like a teaching that disciples who forsake Jesus are going to face complete and final destruction. There's nothing here suggesting everlasting torment. This reminds me of another two sayings, in which Jesus and the author of Hebrews echo the severe prophetic warning of John the Baptizer:

Mt. 7:19 || Mt. 3:8-10 (compare Mt. 3:10 || Lk. 3:9)

¹⁹Every tree that doesn't bear good fruit is chopped down and thrown in the fire.

Heb. 6:4-8

⁴ Suppose people have already been enlightened: they've tasted the heavenly gift; they've shared in the Holy Spirit; ⁵and they've tasted God's good word, and the powers of the coming age. ⁶If they fall away after that, it's impossible to bring them back to a change of heart again.² Because they're hanging the

¹ Lit. "And they gather them."

² Lit. (vv. 4-6 are one long sentence): "For it's impossible to restore again to a change of heart [traditionally: "to repentance"] those who've once been enlightened, who've tasted the heavenly gift, who've shared in the Holy Spirit and have tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age, when they fall away."

Son of God on a cross all over again for themselves, and they're publicly disgracing him. ⁷After all, when the ground drinks up the rain that often falls on it, and it grows plants acceptable to the people it's farmed for, then it gets a blessing¹ from God. ⁸But if it produces thorns and thistles, then it's worthless, and it's close to being cursed.² It's destined to be burned.³

John the Baptizer, Jesus, and the author of Hebrews represent more or less exactly the same teaching. Their common theme is obviously that of complete and final destruction for those who do not repent and learn to do right.

2 Thess. 1:6-10a

“And it's only fair⁴ for God to pay back distress to those who are distressing you, and to give relief to you and to us, the ones who are being distressed. Our relief is going to come at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with his mighty angels.⁵ ⁸In flaming fire, he's going to deal out retribution to those who don't know God,⁶ who don't respond to⁷ the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹They're the ones who're going to experience the sentence of eternal destruction when he comes. They'll flee “from the presence of the Lord and from his powerful glory,”⁸ ¹⁰when he comes to be glorified with his holy ones.

At the end of this age, Jesus is going to come in glory with “flaming fire,” a reference to Isa. 66:15 and Dan. 7:9-11. Those who are being judged are mortals, as in Isaiah 2, which he quotes (see similarly Rev. 6:15-17). The theme of the complete reversal of fortunes between the persecutors and the persecuted here also recalls Isa. 26:12-19. The fire is going to bring *olethros aiōnios*,⁹ age-lasting destruction, on those who oppress the faithful. The destruction that they experience is the destruction of their mortal bodies, which happens more or less instantly, and doesn't take forever, or even the whole coming age, to complete. This is another example of *aiōnios* meaning not *everlasting*, but *age-lasting*. What about these people's eventual resurrection and final judgment and all that? Paul is not talking about that, so it doesn't come into the picture. But even if one did, without any textual basis, take vv. 8-9 as referring to the resurrection and judgment of the unrepentant, also taking *aiōnios* as meaning everlasting, rather than age-lasting, there would still be no basis for the idea of

¹ Lit. “it gets a share of blessing.”

² See Gen. 3:17-18.

³ Lit. “Its end is for burning.”

⁴ Lit. “...suffering for, if indeed it is just.”

⁵ Lit. “with the angels of his might.”

⁶ See Isa. 66:15; Jer. 10:25.

⁷ Or “don't obey.”

⁸ Lit. “from the glory of his power.” See Isa. 2:10, 19, 21.

⁹ *olethros* is Strong's #G3639; *aiōnios* is #G166.

everlasting torment here. An everlasting destruction, after all, is a destruction that is total and permanent, not a destruction that takes forever to accomplish.

Heb. 10:26-31

²⁶Because if we sin deliberately after we've received the knowledge of the truth, there's no sacrifice for sins left anymore. ²⁷There's only the terrible expectation of judgment, and a furious fire that's going to consume the enemies.¹ ²⁸If somebody defies the Law of Moses, they die without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹But suppose there's somebody who tramples on the Son of God. Suppose they treat as unclean the blood of the covenant—the blood that made them holy. Suppose they insult the Spirit of grace. How much worse punishment do you think such a person will deserve? ³⁰After all, we know the One who said,

Revenge is for me alone. I will pay people back.²

And again:

The Lord is going to judge his people.³

³¹It's a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.

The author of Hebrews is clearly talking about final judgment in v. 27, and he says nothing whatever that suggests everlasting torment. No, Heb. 10:27 unmistakably alludes to Isa. 26:11 (LXX), which we discussed above. The two sentences share the words fire (*pur*), rage/zeal (*zēlos*), consume (*esthiō*), and enemies/opponents (*hupenantios*).⁴ The image is one of instant annihilation. And as we've noticed elsewhere, the pastoral intent is to warn Christians to live a repentant life, not to talk about what God is going to do to those bad people over there.

Jas 5:1-5

Come on, now, you rich people: cry and wail over the miseries that are ahead for you!⁵ ²Your wealth has rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have turned to rust, and the rust that's left of them will be a testimony against you. And it's going to eat away your flesh like fire! You've hoarded things in the last days!⁶ ⁴Look! The money⁷ that you dishonestly withheld from your workers, who mowed your fields! It's shouting against

¹ See Isa. 26:11.

² Deut. 32:35.

³ Deut. 32:36; Ps. 135:14.

⁴ Strong's #G4442, #G2205, #G2068, and #G5227.

⁵ Lit. "that are coming upon you."

⁶ This expression "the last days" indicates the time of the transition between this current "age" and the glorious age to come (see Isa. 2:2ff; Acts 2:17).

⁷ Lit. "pay." This is the unjust wealth that turns to flesh-eating rust in the day of judgment.

you! And the cries of the harvest workers have come to the ears of the Lord of Hosts. ⁵You've lived in luxury on the earth, and you've completely indulged yourselves.¹ You've fattened yourselves on the day of slaughter.

James is obviously looking ahead to the judgment that ends this age and inaugurates the age to come. There's nothing "everlasting" about a "day of slaughter." He is talking about sudden and catastrophic destruction that comes upon unrepentant mortals when "the last days" finally become "the last day," the day of judgment (see 2 Pet. 3:7 below).

2 Pet. 3:3-12

³The first thing to understand is this: in the last days,² scoffers are going to be living in mockery of the faith. They'll be living according to their own obsessions.³ ⁴And they'll be saying, "What happened to⁴ the promise of his coming? Because from the time that our ancestors passed away, everything's been the same⁵ as it has been since the beginning of creation." ⁵They say that because they're deliberately ignoring something:⁶ long ago the heavens and the earth were put together—out of water, and through water—by God's word. ⁶Through those waters, the world of that time was destroyed by flooding. ⁷And, by the same word, the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire. They're being kept for the Day of Judgment, for the destruction of godless people.

"His coming" (v. 4) is, of course, Christ's coming in glory at the end of this age. A comparison of vv. 5-7 with Lk. 17:28-30, which we looked at above,⁷ reveals that Peter is basing his teaching on the words of Jesus. Both Jesus and Peter are talking about the great day of judgment that brings this world and this age to a fiery end. It is unrepentant people in their mortal bodies, not resurrected people, who are going to be destroyed when the current heavens and earth are dissolved, and the new heavens and the new earth are made (2 Pet. 3:8-13; Mt. 19:28-29; Rev. 21:1). This passage isn't talking about the resurrection and final judgment of the unrepentant at all.

¹ Or "you've overindulged yourselves."

² This expression "the last days" indicates the time of the transition between this current "age" and the glorious age to come (see Isa. 2:2ff; Acts 2:17).

³ Or "lusts."

⁴ Lit. "Where is."

⁵ Lit. "everything remains the same way."

⁶ Lit. "it escapes their attention willingly that."

⁷ See p. 61 above.

Jude 5-7

⁵But I want to remind you of something—although you’ve known all this since the beginning. Jesus¹ saved a nation out of Egypt, but later destroyed the people that didn’t believe. ⁶And consider the angels that didn’t keep to their own realm of authority, but left their own domain. He has kept them in permanent chains, deep in the darkness, for the great day of judgment. ⁷And think of² Sodom and Gomorrah, and the surrounding towns. They did the same thing. They were committing sexual immorality and going off into perversion.³ They provide an example of⁴ the penalty of age-long fire.

In this passage, Jude uses three examples of severe judgment from the OT to talk about what’s going to happen to false teachers and false believers. (1) Like the unfaithful Israelites who died in the desert of Sinai, they’re going to be destroyed—which is to say, *slain*—before they reach the promised land (v. 5). In this case the promised land stands for the immortal life of the age to come (vv. 20-22). (2) Like the angels who didn’t keep their proper places in the time before the flood, they’re going to be sent to the prison of the underworld until their final judgment (v. 6, compare Isa. 24:21-22). (3) Like the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, they’re going to be incinerated in an instant in “age-long fire” (v. 7).

We’ve already seen Jesus talk about “age-long fire” (Gr. *pur aiōnion*) in two different places (Mt. 18:8; 25:41, both above). This is the fire that destroys your mortal body and leaves you a miserable and powerless trace of consciousness in the underworld for the whole age to come. Jude, like Isaiah in Isa. 24:21-22, Jesus in Mt. 25:41, and John in Rev. 19:17–20:5, foresees a common fate of imprisonment in the underworld for unrepentant angels and humans in the day that God and his Son take up their glorious reign on earth.

Summary and Conclusion of This Chapter’s Results

In this chapter we’ve applied the solid knowledge of biblical eschatology that we gained in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 to all the passages in the NT gospels and epistles that have been claimed to support a doctrine of everlasting torment. We’ve looked at all the passages that talk about “crying and teeth-grinding,” also known as “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” We’ve looked at every passage that refers to Gehenna, the place of “body and soul” destruction of the resurrected unrepentant. We’ve looked at all the passages (all of them in the gospels) that picture a long and miserable

¹ Many mss have “the Lord.” But although a copyist might well think that “Jesus” had to be some kind of mistake, and try to correct it by turning it into “the Lord,” there’s no reason for “the Lord” to be changed to “Jesus.”

² “And think of”: lit. “Similarly.”

³ Lit. “going off after strange flesh.” See Gen. 19:4-25.

⁴ Lit. “by experiencing.”

imprisonment—sometimes with torture—as the fate of the unrepentant. Finally, we’ve looked at every passage that pictures the fate of the unrepentant as fiery destruction. Every single one of these passages sits comfortably within the story of the end that is revealed in Isaiah 24–27, Isaiah 65–66, and Revelation 19–21. None of them, when its place is properly considered within the larger framework of this master prophetic revelation about the future of the world, says anything about everlasting torment. It’s understandable that interpreters of the Bible have often misread the teachings of Jesus and the visions of the Book of Revelation down through the centuries. They have been trying to understand them without the proper key to the ultimate fate of the unrepentant: the great narrative of the end of the world that Jesus and the Book of Revelation share with Isaiah, chief of the OT prophets.

Chapter 6

“The Hard Ones”: The Only Two Passages in the Bible that Actually Talk about Everlasting Torment

Rev. 14:9-12

⁹A third angel followed them. He was saying in a loud voice, “If somebody worships the beast and his image, and accepts his stamp on their forehead or on their hand, ¹⁰then they too are going to drink the wine of God’s fury, mixed full strength in the cup of God’s anger! They’re going to be tormented with fire and sulfur in front of the holy angels and in front of the Lamb.” ¹¹The smoke from their torment goes up forever and ever. And those who worship the beast and his image get no rest day and night—and it’s the same for the person that accepts¹ the mark² of his name. ¹²Here’s where the endurance of the holy ones comes in: they’re the ones who hold to God’s commands and to the faith of Jesus.³

Rev. 20:10

¹⁰And the devil, who was deceiving them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur—where both the beast and the false prophet are. They’re going to be tormented day and night, forever and ever.

The two passages above are the *two and only two* passages in the entire Bible that picture a fate of everlasting torment for anyone. Interestingly, they don’t concern themselves with the fate of unbelievers in general, but with the fate of Satan, together with the beast and the false prophet, and the fate of those who collaborate with the beast and false prophet. Let’s take a careful look at them together.

Taking a Close Look at Rev. 14:9-12

If we want to understand this passage—or any passage in Scripture, for that matter—the first order of business is to get up to speed on the context. Trying to interpret *anything* in Revelation without careful attention to context guarantees ending up in a mess. The first piece of background for Rev. 14:9-12 is in Revelation 12. John sees a war in heaven, and he sees the devil, pictured as a seven-headed and ten-horned dragon, together with a third of the angels, who have rebelled with him, being kicked

¹ Lit. “and if someone accepts.”

² This could refer to a stamp (with ink or dye), or a brand mark, or a tattoo.

³ That is, the faith to which Jesus calls them.

out (Rev. 12:3-4, 7-11). Forced to retreat to the earth, the devil (and presumably his angels) rampages about in a murderous fury, “because he knows his time is short” (12:12). This “short time” is promptly explained as “time, times, and half a time,” or, in other words, three and a half years (12:14; see also 11:2-3; 12:6; 13:5). This particular time period, together with the vision of the devil as a seven-headed and ten-horned monster, ties this vision to Daniel 7 (see Dan. 7:23-25; 12:7). Whereas John saw the devil *coming down* from heaven to the earth in Rev. 12:9, 13, in Rev. 13:1 he sees a “beast” *coming up* out of the sea onto the earth, “having seven heads and ten horns,” just like the devil. Although John doesn’t use this term, I think it’s fair to call him an/the “antichrist.” After all, he appears to be a human representative of the devil who purports to be God. And he has his own death and resurrection with which he can compete with Jesus Christ (Rev. 13:3, 12, 14; 17:8, 10), and amazing miracles too (Rev. 13:13-14; 16:14). He has the full backing of the devil: “The dragon gave his power and his throne to the beast, and great authority” (Rev. 13:2). Like the devil on earth and the boastful horn on the head of the fourth beast in Daniel 7, this beast has a career that lasts three and a half years (Rev. 13:5).

The beast’s job looks like a devilish mirror image of the ministry of Jesus. Whereas Jesus invites people to worship God through works of healing and mercy, the beast recruits people to worship the devil through displays of raw and deadly power (Rev. 13:2-4, 13-15). Among other things, he appears to have the ability to incinerate his enemies with fire out of the sky (13:13). (If that doesn’t sound familiar, it ought to). The beast has a two-stage strategy for motivating people to worship him, which is administrated by his communications director, the “false prophet” (Rev. 13:11-12; compare 16:13; 19:20). First, threaten every single person on earth with death if they don’t worship an image of him, and second, have the authorities execute and/or starve out anyone who doesn’t get a tattoo of the beast’s name or number (13:15-16). He is a murderous and worldwide persecutor of those who believe in Jesus, and he very nearly succeeds in wiping them from the face of the earth (Rev. 13:7, 15; compare Dan. 7:21; 12:7; Mt. 24:22; Mk 13:20).

In the verse right before our text we get the first mention of “Babylon the Great” in Revelation, and it comes pretty much out of the blue:

Rev. 14:8

8A second angel followed him. He was saying, “She has fallen! Babylon the Great has fallen! From her cup, all the nations have drunk the wine of her furious craving for immorality.”¹

¹ Lit. “...fallen—she who, from the wine of the fury of her sexual immorality, all the nations have drunk.” Or, possibly, “...fallen—she who, from the wine of the fury of her sexual immorality, drank up all the nations.” Cities are always symbolized as feminine in the Bible and ancient Mediterranean literature. In Revelation, Empress Babylon’s drunken

All of this is important basic context for Rev. 14:9-12. I'm ready to comment now. Before I start it might be a good thing to reread the passage.

Verse 9. There is no ambiguity here. The angel is talking about the consequences for *anyone* who gives in and collaborates with the beast.

Verse 10. "They too are going to drink the wine of God's fury." The angel is employing a familiar OT image (see Ps. 11:6; 75:8; Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:15-17, 27). Later in Revelation it is going to be applied particularly to Babylon the Great (Rev. 18 and 19). Babylon, last and most powerful of all empires in human history, gets all the nations of the world crazy drunk with her addiction to luxury (14:8; 18:2-3). (If this doesn't sound familiar, it ought to.) Shortly before Jesus comes in glory, it's going to be her turn to drink, and it will be a cup of fire (18:6-8). Babylon is the beast's home country, so it looks as though she is going to get payback for the beast's practice of sending fire down from the skies on her enemies (13:13). In fact, ironically, it will be the beast himself who brings this about: he turns traitor and joins her enemies to burn her with fire (17:15-18; 18:8-10). Isn't this just like the devil—to destroy everything, even his own worshipers? The fact that Babylon's fall is announced for the first time immediately before our passage (in 14:8) indicates that 14:9-11 foreshadows the destruction of Babylon. But whether willingly or under the threat of death, people throughout the world worship the beast, not just people in Babylon (13:3-4, 7-8). So the angel's warning is for all nations, and isn't restricted to Babylon. That's why the angel says, "...they *too* are going to drink the wine of God's fury." The judgment that is going to come upon Babylon is going to come on all those who worship the beast, when their turn comes.

When we read Revelation 19–21, the angel's reference to "sulfur" in this verse will also reveal itself to have been a hint, a foreshadowing, of the lake of fire, which "burns with sulfur" (19:20; 20:9; 21:8). This gets interesting. On one hand, in the OT fire that comes down from God to burn people up completely is often said to be combined with sulfur (Gen. 19:24; Deut. 29:23; Isa. 30:33; Ezek. 38:22; Lk. 17:29). And on the other hand, we saw in Chapter 4 above that John wants us to understand his vision of the resurrected unrepentant being thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14) as representing the same ultimate fate of annihilation as his vision of fire coming down from heaven and devouring the hordes of Gog and Magog (Rev. 20:9). So it seems that the warning in Rev. 14:9-10 contains a hint that the fiery end of Babylon the Great (Rev. 17:16; 18:8-10; 19:3) prefigures the ultimate fate of all the unrepentant.

sexual promiscuity becomes a metaphor for a suicidal addiction to wealth and luxury with which the Great City infects the whole world. See Revelation 18.

Verse 11. This verse is a comment by John on the warning that he has just heard the angel give in vv. 9-10. With a single exception, every phrase in this verse that is not repeated from vv. 9-10 is a cross-reference to Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 34:

Isa. 34:9-10

⁹And the streams of Edom¹ shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into **sulfur**; her land shall become **burning** pitch. ¹⁰**Night and day** it shall not be quenched; its **smoke shall go up forever**. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it **forever and ever**.

This is classic. As you’ll remember from my commentary on Revelation 19–21, John regularly makes clear verbal cross-references, especially with Isaiah, when he believes that what he is seeing is something that God has already shown to another prophet. By using this technique, John is telling us that what God revealed to Isaiah in relation to Edom is what is going to happen not only to Babylon the Great, but to all those who worship the beast. The only difference is that it is the torment of the beast’s worshipers, rather than the scorched land of Edom, whose smoke goes up forever. “They never get rest,” John insists. We’ll talk about that in a moment.

First we need to ask exactly what it is that God is revealing about Edom in Isaiah’s prophecy. Is God saying that the land of Edom (which lies about 50 miles south from Jerusalem) is going to be a wasteland of burning pitch literally forever—that it is going to send up black clouds of toxic smoke into the skies of the new creation for all eternity? Hardly. How could that be, since the present heavens and earth are going to be dissolved and completely renovated? The same principle applies to the land of Babylon, about which John hears in Rev. 19:3, “Hallelujah! Her smoke goes up forever and ever!” John certainly believes that the land of Babylon the Great will be reduced to smoke and ashes, but according to his own vision of Rev. 21:1 won’t literally be smoldering for all eternity. Its destruction will be as sudden and total as a mill stone being cast into the ocean (Rev. 18:21). It will take place in “one hour” (Rev. 18:10). And that ruined land will be cleansed by fire and renovated along with all the rest of the earth. So it’s abundantly clear that the “forever and ever” part of Isaiah’s *and* John’s visions about Edom and Babylon doesn’t convey literal temporal information. What it tells us is that these two deadly enemy nations will never, ever regain the power to harm the people of God. When God has finished dealing with them, they will be no more. This is exactly the same thing we saw in relation to Isa. 66:22-24. God is not telling us in that passage that there will be rotting, stinking, burning corpses right outside the walls of the New Jerusalem for all eternity. God is revealing that *this time*, when the stubbornly rebellious make their last stand in the new creation, the process of destruction will

¹ Lit. “her streams.”

be complete and final. If you want the more literal version, you have to go to Isa. 26:10-11 and Rev. 20:9.

But what is this, then, about the never-ending suffering, the “torment,” of the beast-worshippers? Why is it said that they never, ever get rest? In order to understand this part, you have to understand John’s description of the situation that all the faithful will be facing when the beast starts his program of persecution (Revelation 13). John is saying that if you refuse to collaborate with the beast, you’re not even going to be able to go out and buy food for your family. Any moment you spend in public—even if you manage to find someone kind enough to share food with you—will be a moment in which you risk exposure, arrest, and execution. The stress of hiding may well be overwhelming, the dread of capture unrelenting. You’ll crave rest, but you won’t be able to find it. This moment will demand raw faith. The devil will be whispering, “All this grinding stress will go away—all you have to do is tell one little white lie. Surely the Lord will forgive you.” That’s the point at which John and the angel warn, “*No*. There will be no rest, ever, if you give in to the demands of the beast.” Jesus says that those who are not willing to take up their cross and follow him are not worthy of him (Mt. 10:38 || Lk. 9:23-34), and he means it. And he underlines it in Revelation (see also Rev. 2:10; 3:11). In my book, *The End of the Unrepentant*, I comment on the strangely evocative connection that John makes with Edom, Israel’s longest-standing enemy:

During the beast’s regime, every individual Christian is going to feel their own personal Edom breathing down their neck. And the temptation that every single one will face at that time is the temptation of Esau, father of the nation of Edom. Even as Esau gave up his birthright when, in a moment of weakness, he felt fear for his own life (Gen. 25:29–34, esp. 32), so Christians under the regime of the beast will be tempted to capitulate and give worship to the beast and his sponsor, the devil, and so to throw away their priceless inheritance of eternal life. Give way to temptation like Esau, *and you become Esau, you become Edom* (see Heb. 12:16–17). John makes it very clear that those who collaborate with the beast are the end-times analog of Edom in OT times. [L]ike the situation in Nazi Germany, saving your own life will not simply require a passive acceptance of the beast’s claims; it will require you to inform on your friends *and collaborate in the beast’s program of exterminating Christians*. If you capitulate to the beast, you will truly have turned in your citizenship in the true Israel, and will have become an Edomite, the nearby deadly enemy of your Christian brothers and sisters.¹ ... And like Esau, you will never be able to regain what you’ve thrown away in order to gain a brief

¹ *The End of the Unrepentant: A Study of the Biblical Themes of Fire and Being Consumed* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), pp. 80-81.

reprieve from the physical death that you are going to have to face at some point anyway. Imagine an excruciating remorse that torments you forever and ever without reprieve, and you will have a glimpse into the cost making the wrong decision.

In Rev. 19:3 and 20:10, the image of everlasting burning conveys the assurance that Babylon the Great, the devil, the beast, and the false prophet, will never again have the power to harm those who put their trust in God through Jesus Christ. They won't just spring up again like Bermuda grass after a fire; they will truly be gone. But in Rev. 14:11, the emphasis is on an everlasting and irrevocable fate that Christians must avoid *for themselves*. The time to come is going to be terribly difficult to endure, but every Christian's eternal life depends on it. The very next verses confirm that this is what we are intended to take from vv. 9-11:

Rev. 14:12-13

¹²This is the endurance of the holy ones, the ones who hold to God's commands and to the faith of Jesus.¹ ¹³And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, “Write this down: Those who die in the Lord from now on are blessed. Yes, says the Spirit! They're going to be able to rest from their hard work.”²

Remaining clear about the stakes of winning or losing this spiritual battle is how you will stay strong. The compassionate voice of God speaks reassuringly after the dire warning: rest and blessing is coming, so be brave and finish the race, complete the hard work of enduring to the end.

Five Principles for Deciding Whether to Take Things “Literally”

Someone will say, “All right, you've made a reasonable case that the *purpose* of the warning of everlasting torment in Rev. 14:9-12 is to help people steel themselves to face life-threatening persecution. But that doesn't mean the warning isn't to be taken literally!” This is a true and fair statement. How *do* we decide what to take literally in the Book of Revelation? After all, the whole book is made up of visions that represent nearly everything that they reveal in symbolic terms. Jesus is not a literal sword-swallower (Rev. 1:16; 19:15, 21), nor is he a lion or a lamb (Rev. 5:5-6). The “beast” is not a literal seven-headed Hydra-like monster (Rev. 13:1; 17:3), and most of us would agree that God is not going to grow oysters twenty stories tall in order to supply the “single pearl” gates of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:21). Expressions like these are often described as symbols, images, metaphors, figures of speech, and the like. Let's not distract ourselves with an over-complicated discussion of what these different kinds of expressions are, and about whether and how they convey

¹ That is, the faith to which Jesus calls them.

² Lit. “from their hard labors.”

information in a non-literal way. Instead, let's just agree that John communicates his visions by means of *word pictures*, and let's agree that word pictures can either be literal or non-literal. Here are five important principles for interpreting word pictures in Revelation:

Principle 1. Each individual word picture should be interpreted so that it remains self-consistent throughout Revelation. We shouldn't interpret a word picture literally in one instance and non-literally in another instance. For example, once we understand that white clothing symbolizes purity, we should understand every instance of it in Revelation as symbolizing purity (see Rev. 3:4-5; 3:18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14). We shouldn't pick out one instance, like Rev. 4:4, and say that in that case John is just talking about ordinary and literal white clothes. Similarly, we discover in Rev. 22:16 that Jesus calls himself "the bright morning star." Learning this commits us to the same interpretation of Christ's promise to give the overcomer the morning star in Rev. 2:28. When we interpret Rev. 2:28 so that it is consistent with Rev. 22:16, we understand that Jesus has promised that he will give *himself* to the overcomer. The "morning star" is thus a non-literal word picture, and it means the same thing in both its instances.

Principle 2. Any word picture should be interpreted so that its literalness matches its literalness within any OT prophecy that John alludes to in using it. If a word picture is literal in its OT prophetic context, we should assume that it's going to be literal in Revelation. If it's non-literal in its OT prophetic context, we should assume that it's going to be non-literal in Revelation. Why should we expect there to be this kind of correspondence? Because John clearly understands his visions to be part of one integrated stream of prophetic revelation from God. John is not snipping things from the OT and pasting them together like a collage made from magazine cuttings, without reference to their original meaning or context. He's giving us an account of actual visions that he experienced as he was being prayerful in the Spirit on a Sunday morning on Patmos (Rev. 1:9-11). When John recognizes that what he is seeing is something that another prophet saw before him, he takes care to describe his vision in words that alert his readers to the presence of a connection. He looks upon all biblical prophecy—including his own—as one interconnected revelation, and therefore we should expect the function of word pictures in Revelation to be organically connected to their function in the visions of the OT prophets. For example, in Daniel 7, the beast with its ten horns is a composite symbol of the last evil empire and the sequence of rulers leading up to its final king (Dan. 7:7-8, 11, 19-27). Likewise, in Revelation, the beast with its horns is a composite symbol of the last great evil empire and the sequence of rulers leading up to its final king (Rev. 13:1-10; 17:3, 7-18, esp. v. 9).

Principle 3. Any word picture should be interpreted so that it makes sense when interpreted in the context of closely-related word pictures in the Book of

Revelation. For example: John tells us in Rev. 4:5 that the seven blazing lamps in front of God’s throne in heaven “are the seven Spirits of God.” He later tells us that he sees golden bowls full of incense, “which is¹ the prayers of the holy ones” (5:8). Comments like these make it clear that John does not take his visions of the heavenly temple and its equipment literally, as though there were literal, physical golden lamps and bowls in heaven. The heavenly temple and its individual elements symbolize truths about God and his relationship with humanity and the creation. Accordingly, when we encounter other temple-related word pictures, we should apply what John has told us in these two cases. For instance, in Rev. 6:9, John sees “underneath the altar of sacrifice, the souls of those who’d been slaughtered because of the word of God, and because of the testimony that they’d maintained.” In the OT, the blood of animals offered to God is to be poured out at the base of the altar of sacrifice (Exod. 29:12; Lev. 4:7). John’s vision tells us that the slain witnesses have had their lives “poured out,” but that God has accepted their lives as a holy offering to him, and their lives are held safe by God (see Rev. 6:9-11).

Principle 4. Any word picture should be interpreted so that it remains compatible with non-figurative (straightforward, informational) and interpretative statements that John gives us. For example:

- In Rev. 1:12, 16, 20 John sees seven lampstands and he sees seven stars in Jesus’ hand. Jesus interprets these vision elements for John: the seven lampstands “are” (in other words, they symbolize) the seven churches, and the seven stars “are” (the stars symbolize) the angels of the seven churches.
- As we saw just above, John explains that the incense offered to God by the 24 elders is the prayers of the holy ones. The word picture of burning incense is not literal; it represents communication—prayers being received by God.
- In Rev. 5:6 John sees a Lamb standing as though slaughtered, and he sees that it has seven horns and seven eyes. He explains that these horns and eyes “are,” which is to say these represent, the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth.²
- In Rev. 16:13-14, John sees three frogs coming out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. He immediately explains what he understands these frogs to represent: “They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.”
- We will end with an example that is a little more involved. In Rev. 21:23-24 we read of the New Jerusalem that “the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth

¹ Literally “are.” John is referring to the incense, which is plural in the Greek, not to the golden bowls.

² The “seven spirits of God” is its own puzzle, which we will discuss under Principle 5. What is not hard to understand here in any case is that Jesus is not to be understood as a literal lamb with seven horns and seven eyes.

will bring their splendor into it.” This word picture—of the nations and kings of the earth being illuminated by the glory of the New Jerusalem and bringing gifts into it—looks on first glance like a promise that the wicked “kings of the earth” (6:15; 16:14; 17:2; 18:3, 9; 19:19), along with all of humanity, will have access to the New Jerusalem (see also Isa. 2:2; 60:3-10). But this promise must be interpreted by John’s words in Rev. 21:27: “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” John clearly explains that the promise of entry to the New Jerusalem applies only to the holy ones. In the new creation, the holy ones *are* the “kings of the earth” (see Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10), and they constitute all of humanity on earth. This is the sense in which all humanity has access to the New Jerusalem in Rev. 21:24.

Principle 5. Any word picture should be interpreted so that it remains compatible with the teachings of Jesus above all (since the resurrected Jesus is the source of the Book of Revelation—see Rev. 1:1), but also with the teachings of the authors of the NT and the Bible in general. For example, we don’t conclude from John’s repeated use of the expression “the seven spirits” (Rev. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6) that there are actually seven separate Holy Spirits. We understand from very many passages elsewhere in Scripture that there is one Holy Spirit. Our knowledge of this is strong enough that we interpret John’s words, in the light of Zech. 4:10b, as referring to the creation-wide scope of the Spirit’s activity.

Applying the Five Principles for Determining “Literalness”

Let’s now apply each of these five principles to the question of whether we should understand the “smoke from their torment” (Rev. 14:11) as literally going up “forever and ever.”

Principle 1. We should expect the literalness of this word picture to match its literalness elsewhere in Revelation. There is, it turns out, only one other place in Revelation in which we hear of smoke going up forever and ever. Let’s see if it can be taken literally.

Rev. 19:3

Hallelujah! Her smoke goes up forever and ever!

As we saw, this verse refers back to the instant¹ and total destruction of Babylon the Great by fire just narrated in Revelation 18. The beast, joined by the kings of the east, has betrayed the great civilization of Babylon, and together they have completely destroyed it with fire (Rev. 17:16-18). Rev. 19:3 is also a reference back to Rev. 14:8-11 and to Isa. 34:10, both of which we considered above. In Rev. 18:21,

¹ See “all in one day,” Rev. 18:8, and “in one hour,” Rev. 18:10, 17, 19.

the sudden and final end of Babylon the Great was conveyed by using a dramatic word picture of drowning in the deep sea (alluding to Jer. 51:63-64). Here in 19:3, Babylon’s end is expressed in dramatic fiery imagery. The force of this imagery, which is projected “into the ages of the ages,” is that Babylon’s destruction will be irrevocable, permanent, and final. Ruins that are imagined as smoldering forever are, by force of logic, imagined as forever left un-rebuilt. In Rev. 19:3 we are being assured that Babylon, the greatest enemy of God’s people ever to appear on earth (16:6; 17:6; 18:24), will never rise again.

Let’s pause for a moment and consider whether it is even possible to interpret this idea of endless smoldering literally. Suppose we agree that Babylon the Great symbolizes a great human civilization that achieves the status of world empire on the earth at the end of this age. Now let’s dare to imagine something like a great nuclear conflagration, which is to be instigated by the beast and the “kings of the east” (see Rev. 16:12-14; 17:12-13, 15-16). Let’s imagine that the incendiary attack instantly kills a large portion of humanity and destroys every living thing that it touches, along with every technological accomplishment of humankind within the borders of Babylon the Great. Now let’s remind ourselves that God’s plans for this earth (according to the Book of Revelation) include the radical dissolution of the current heavens and earth (6:12-14; 16:19-21; 21:1b) followed by their radical re-creation (21:1-4).¹ As a result, if we are to interpret Rev. 19:3 literally, we will be required to imagine that God, in the process of renewing the entire creation, plans to miraculously lift the smoldering wreck of Babylon the Great from the skin of the present earth, and hold it in suspense while re-creating the world. We must believe that God will then transplant it into the new creation—rather like a dead and putrefying scab that God chooses to transplant onto the pristine resurrected body of the new earth and leave unhealed for all eternity. This idea—of a smoldering Babylon miraculously preserved and transported into the new creation, so that it can throw toxic smoke into the skies of the new creation forever and ever—is obviously intolerable to the Christian imagination. Therefore Rev. 19:3 cannot be, and is certainly not to be, taken literally in regard to its temporal force. Principle 1 tells us that we shouldn’t interpret a word picture literally in one place in Revelation and non-literally in another—but that we should interpret each word picture consistently in all its instances. Since everlasting smoldering *cannot* be taken literally in Rev. 19:3, Principle 1 tells us that it *is not to be* taken literally in Rev. 14:11.

Principle 2 tells us that a word picture in Revelation should be interpreted so that its literalness matches that of any OT passage that it alludes to. Rev. 14:11 very clearly alludes to the word picture in Isa. 34:9-10, in which the streams of Edom are pictured as burning forever with sulfur and pitch. We can apply the same thought

¹ See also Isa. 24:1-20; 64:1-2; 65:17-19; 66:15, 22; 1 Pet. 3:7-13.

experiment to Isa. 34:9-10 as we did to Rev. 19:3. Do we believe that God is going to miraculously transport poisonous and poisoned Edom into the new creation, so that its streams of pitch and sulfur can spew toxic smoke into the skies of the new creation forever? Or do we believe that the word picture of an everlasting smoldering wasteland is intended to assure the people of God that perennial enemies such as Edom will never again arise to threaten the faithful? If the second of these is what we believe, then Principle 2 tells us that we should not take the everlasting smoke of torment in Rev. 14:11 literally either. We should take it as a way of expressing the absolute finality and irrevocability of God's judgment in each case.

"Ah, well," someone will respond, "in the deepest sense, Rev. 14:10-11 and 19:3 and Isa. 34:9-10 are actually pictures of the torments of the lost in hell. Rev. 19:3 and Isa. 34:9-10 are not ultimately about literal Edom or Babylon the Great in this age, and Rev. 14:11 refers to all the lost, not just to the literal followers of the beast." To anyone who wants to try this move, I reply that you need to decide whether you're going to be a literalist or not. Aren't you now tossing aside the very literalism that you have always used to justify belief in everlasting torment, and retreating into allegory—so that you can salvage your belief in everlasting torment when literalism goes against you? Why not just give it up?

Principle 3 tells us that we should interpret word pictures in Revelation so that they work harmoniously together with related word pictures in Revelation. This brings us back to the second of our two "hard ones," Rev. 20:10. This verse is the only other passage in the entire Bible aside from Rev. 14:9-10 that explicitly pictures everlasting torment. I quote it below, including relevant context on both sides. All of this material belongs together with Rev. 14:9-10, and we should expect that the two passages will help to interpret one another.

Rev. 20:6-10, 14-15; 21:8

⁶The person who gets to take part in the first resurrection is blessed and holy. The second death doesn't have any power at all over them. ...

⁷And when the thousand years are over, Satan's going to be let out of his prison. ⁸He's going to go out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth... ⁹And they...surrounded...the Beloved City. And fire came down out of heaven and burned them up. ¹⁰And the devil, who was deceiving them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur—where both the beast and the false prophet are. They're going to be tormented day and night, forever and ever...

¹⁴And Death and Hades were thrown in the lake of fire. That's the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵If somebody wasn't found recorded in the Book of Life, they were thrown in the lake of fire...

21:8 But as for the cowards, and the untrustworthy, and the filthy, and the murderers, and the sexually immoral, and the sorcerers, and the idolaters, and all the liars, their inheritance is going to be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur—which is the second death.

We’ve already seen that Rev. 20:7-10 pictures the great last rebellion of Satan and all the resurrected unrepentant. This passage, which has intimate links to Isa. 26:10–27:5 and Heb. 10:27, pictures the final judgment and permanent removal of all the forces of deadly danger to the faithful. Christians typically think about the final disposition of the unrepentant as though it is something that the unrepentant experience in a completely passive way. But these three passages (Isa. 26:10–27:5 || Heb. 10:27 || Rev. 20:7-10) reveal created beings ferociously active in attempted violence against God’s faithful ones. They are not pictured as helpless pawns to be endlessly dangled in fiery torments at God’s pleasure, but as incredibly dangerous attackers who must be stopped once and for all for the protection of God’s beloved. The logic of this situation leads not to the question, “Will God ever be done tormenting them?” but rather to the question, “Will God’s beloved have to look over their shoulder forever?” It is to this situation that John applies the word picture from Isa. 34:10, with its language of “day and night, forever and ever” (Isa. 34:10 || Rev. 14:11 || 20:10). Will deadly enemies—the devil in particular—spring up perennially, forever? No. They will be uprooted and destroyed in a way that is absolutely permanent. This is the force of the “forever and ever” language in all of these passages.

Can we find other kinds of evidence in Rev. 20:6–21:8 that the *annihilation* of the unrepentant is the deeper story beneath the word picture of 20:10? We certainly can. First of all, note how Rev. 20:7-10 is preceded by a reference to the unrepentant being vulnerable to the power of the “second death.” The expression is repeated in 20:14 and 21:8, and in both verses it interprets the “lake of fire [and sulfur].” So we have the idea of a second—and presumably final—death on the one hand, and the image of being thrown into something like a volcanic caldera burning with sulfurous molten lava on the other hand. Together, these two elements can hardly avoid suggesting the idea that the unrepentant will face complete annihilation. Added to this, of course, we have the image of fire coming down from heaven and “devouring” them (Rev. 20:9 || 2 Kgs 1:10 || Isa. 26:11). In other words, in the texts surrounding Rev. 20:10 we have descriptions of engulfing fire, drowning fire, and the second death. These three descriptions all support one another in suggesting the idea of annihilation. In the midst of these word pictures we encounter a picture of torment “day and night, forever and ever” (20:10) for Satan, the beast, and the false prophet—the most dangerous enemies of humanity ever to appear in the earth—*beings holding major responsibility for the demise of the entire human race and the*

earth itself. They, together with their collaborators (Rev. 14:11), merit the strongest language for final and irrevocable extinction within the covers of Scripture: the language of Isa. 34:9-10, which assures the faithful that their deadly enemies *will never, ever arise again*.

Principle 4 says that any word picture should be interpreted so that it remains compatible with non-figurative and interpretative statements that John gives us. We saw in applying **Principle 3** just now that John twice interprets the lake of fire as “the second death” (20:14; 21:8). Whereas “the lake of fire” is a word picture, “the second death” looks more like straightforward, non-pictorial language. **Principle 4** dictates that we rely on the non-pictorial and interpretive information to interpret the material presented in word pictures. The concept of the second death, in other words, should determine how we understand the lake of fire, rather than the word picture of the lake of fire determining how we understand the concept of the second death. As we’ve seen above, there is no way to take everything we have here literally. We either take “the second death” as an exceedingly non-literal way of talking about an everlasting and tortured form of resurrected life, or we take “the second death” as one among a number of clues that invite us to interpret the language of “day and night, forever and ever” non-literally in Rev. 14:11 and 20:10. **Principle 4** recommends the second of these two approaches. Those who opt for the first approach must once again choose the less literal interpretation over the more literal.

Principle 5 says that any word picture should be interpreted so that it remains compatible with the teachings of Jesus above all (since he is the source of the Book of Revelation—see Rev. 1:1), but also with the teachings of the authors of the NT and the Bible in general.

At the very beginning of this book, we looked at sayings of Jesus about “Gehenna” as the final fate of the unrepentant. Far from representing a state of everlasting torment, biblical Gehenna names a place outside the New Jerusalem of the new creation, where the rebellious and unrepentant attempt for the last time to attack the people of God. It is the place where all the forces of death are defeated and burned up completely (Isa. 30:29-33; 66:22-24; see also Isa. 26:10). Whether it be the teachings of Jesus, or the author of Hebrews, who appeals to Isa. 26:10 in Heb. 10:27, or conceivably even Paul, who teaches that “the last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26, 54-55), a solid core of NT teaching holds that the end of the unrepentant will come when they attempt to attack the community of the resurrected holy ones and are destroyed.

Outside the Book of Revelation, there is not a single passage in the Bible that pictures the ultimate fate of the unrepentant as everlasting torment. But even the Book of Revelation itself also presents us with the very same story of the end as the one common to Isaiah, Jesus, and the author of Hebrews: the story of an attempted attack on the resurrected people of God in the New Jerusalem (20:7-10 || 20:13-15).

In view of all this, it's very easy to decide which of Revelation's pictures of the end we are going to take as the interpretative key to the other. Revelation shares its central story of the end of the unrepentant with Isaiah 24–27. It's a story of a graceful second chance violently refused, followed by the complete annihilation of Satan and the unrepentant. The theme of everlasting, “day and night” torment for Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and all those who collaborate with them (Rev. 14:10-11; 19:3; 20:10) repeats the central theme of Isaiah 34. There, the picture of never-ending “day and night” smoldering is not literal, but has the function of assuring the faithful that the danger from their deadly enemies, no matter how persistent and perennial in this age, will at last be completely and permanently removed.

Concluding Remarks on “The Hard Ones”

We've now looked at five sound principles for interpreting word pictures in Revelation, and we've discovered that all five of them point to the same conclusion. Pictures of Babylon's ruins smoldering forever and unrepentant beings being tormented forever are not to be taken literally in regard to their endlessness. They are temporal hyperboles designed to convey the utter finality of the destruction of Babylon the Great, and the complete and irrevocable nature of the destruction that awaits Satan and his collaborators.

Some may complain that this chapter has been full of sophisticated theories and principles and complicated reasoning. Surely, someone will say, the right interpretation is going to be the simplest and the easiest to understand. But consider what Peter had to say about the writings of the apostle Paul:

2 Pet. 2:15-16

¹⁵It's just like our dear brother Paul has also written to you, by the wisdom that's been given to him. ¹⁶He also talks about these things in all his letters. There are certain things in them that are hard to understand—which ignorant and unstable people twist. They also do the same thing to the other scriptures—leading to their own destruction.

If Paul's letters are hard to understand, how much more so the Book of Revelation, the single most complex and multi-layered book in the Bible, and, for that matter, of all ancient literature! So the question to put to my arguments in this chapter is not “Do they require you to think hard?” but rather, “When you think hard, do they make consistent sense of the Book of Revelation? Do they show knowledge of and sensitivity to all the relevant scriptures? Are they consistent, or do they keep hopping from one footing to another, in order to avoid an unwanted conclusion?” These are the kinds of questioning that all interpretative arguments must answer—not only mine, but equally those of the advocates of everlasting torment.

Conclusion

The Fight for the High Ground of “Taking it Literally”

Advocates for everlasting torment always try to claim the high ground of allegiance to biblical authority. They more or less say, “Other people—the false teachers and wolves in sheep’s clothing—explain away what the Bible says, but we champion the true message without compromise!” It very often turns out that this is empty rhetorical posturing. As we’ve seen, nobody in the debate between annihilationism and everlasting torment can claim to take every biblical teaching on the subject literally. For example, Jesus says, “You will not get out of there until you have paid the last cent!” (Mt. 5:23-26 || Lk. 12:57-59; Mt. 18:21-35). According to my reading of these passages, in the overarching context of Isaiah 24–27 and Rev. 20:1-10, Jesus means exactly what he is saying. You are going to be in for a long and unpleasant imprisonment, from which, at long last, you will finally be released. The champions of everlasting torment, on the other hand, cannot take literally the implication that you will eventually “get out of there.” Now, I suppose that they could turn around, having read this book, and decide that these passages can be taken literally after all, and that *after* the resurrection of the unrepentant and the great rebellion of Rev. 20:7-10 || Isa. 26:10-11, then everlasting torment will begin. But that isn’t the point. The point is that, by previously taking the “last penny” sayings as referring to everlasting torment, they demonstrate themselves able and willing to take things non-literally when it suits how they are inclined to interpret a passage. In the same way, they’ll take Isa. 34:8-10 non-literally, because none of us likes the idea that you’ll be able to look southeast from the New Jerusalem in the new creation and for all eternity see toxic smoke rising from (what once used to be) Edom. They know that they have the right and the responsibility as intelligent children of God to make determinations as to when the scriptures should be taken literally and when not. But they often deny that right to their opponents. This double standard behavior is known as *ad hominem attack* and *hypocrisy*.

The Bible is simply brimming with similes, metaphors, figures of speech, symbolic visions, and every form of poetic and literary verbal creativity. God is verbally creative (see Jn 1:1!), and so is every single Holy Spirit-inspired person that he calls to the ministry of conveying his word. Therefore the Bible is almost the furthest thing imaginable from an instruction book in precise and pedestrian prose. Jesus himself chose *parables* as his main mode of teaching—because he would not allow people to assume that understanding God and his Kingdom was a matter of

mastering the right religious facts and memorizing the right religious formulas. We are youngsters in creation, learners in the grammar school of revelation. God's ways have to be *pondered* and *digested*, and there is no escaping the fact that we hearers/readers must engage our minds, hearts, and souls in the process of making meaning from what God reveals. We are being lazy students of God when we hanker for a Bible that contains straight, easy-to-understand information—like a textbook that has the answers to all the problems at the back. If we just had that kind of a Bible, we wouldn't have to face our own (and our preachers') fallibility, and we wouldn't have to exercise our *faith* in God's willingness to help us make sense of it. We can *want* a prosaic, instruction-book Bible until the cows come home, but that is not what God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit have given us. *The Holy Bible*, the one we actually have, requires us to think, to put things together, to discern a larger story. It forces us to decide—in view of the larger story that we have discerned so far—what makes sense taken literally, and what doesn't make sense taken literally. And we're accountable for our choices. Our choices reveal to God what we're made of, and we can't escape that. All we can do is humbly join the psalmist in praying,

Ps. 19:12-13

¹² But who can discern their own errors?
 Forgive my hidden faults.
¹³ Keep your servant also from willful sins;
 may they not rule over me.
 Then I will be blameless,
 innocent of great transgression.

If anyone insists that they take everything literally, hand them a little slip of paper, and ask them to write down the year and month when they took Lk. 14:33 literally: “In the same way, every one of you who does not give up all of his possessions cannot be my disciple.” (By the way, there are Christians who *do* take that particular passage literally, but few of them would be disturbed by the conclusions in this book.)

Suppose someone eventually admits that we're always forced to take *some* things non-literally. If their ideal is that the best interpretation is the one that takes the greatest proportion of passages literally, then the annihilationist view wins hands down. As I have demonstrated very clearly, only two out of well over a hundred biblical passages about the ultimate destiny of the unrepentant picture a fate of unending torment.¹ All the rest affirm that destruction—final and irrevocable destruction—is the divinely decreed penalty for created beings that persist in

¹ For more detail, see my other book, *The End of the Unrepentant: A Study of the Biblical Themes of Fire and Being Consumed* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

unrepentance. Truthfully, neither I nor advocates of everlasting torment would want to settle this matter on the basis of crude arithmetic. Let's agree that the deeper—and the real—reason for deciding one way or another is going to have to do with *theology*. It's ultimately going to go back to how we understand the character of God, and secondarily, to the way in which we understand the nature of human being.

“Everlasting Hell Exists Because God is Righteous and Holy!”

People like me, who advocate for the biblical picture of annihilation for the unrepentant, actually agree with advocates of everlasting torment on a lot of things. For example, I agree that human beings are created by God. I agree that we are accountable to our Creator for how we use the gifts and powers of life that have been given to us. I agree that God has the complete right as Creator to destroy any created being that persists in living contrary to the purposes for which God created it. I agree that those who accept the grace of God extended to us in Jesus Christ, and who “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Mt. 3:8 || Lk. 3:8; Mt. 7:19), will be granted the gift of resurrection to everlasting life. I agree that those who do not repent and bear the fruit of repentance will also be resurrected, but theirs will be a resurrection of judgment and ultimately condemnation (Jn 5:29). Assuming for a moment that it is possible, given the totality of the biblical evidence, to come to either conclusion, what is it that persuades the advocates of everlasting torment that it would be *out of character* for God to deal with the unrepentant by annihilating them? The argument that I have heard over and over again is that belief in annihilation fails to take God's infinite *righteousness* and *holiness* into account. Let's spend some time looking at these ideas.

God's Righteousness

In the Bible, we can define God's righteousness, which I heartily affirm to be infinite, in terms of agape¹ love. In the NT, agape love connotes the unselfish desire for the well-being of the other. God is the author and source of agape love (1 Jn 4:19), which he holds for all the beings that he creates (Ps. 145:9). It is the greatest of all eternal virtues (Mt. 5:43-48; 1 Cor. 13). Biblically speaking, righteousness is agape love manifested through justice, fairness, and kindness (e.g. Ps. 33:5; Isa: 58:1-12; Jer. 9:23-24; Ezek. 18:5-9). In the Bible, righteousness also connotes law-abidingness (e.g. Lk. 1:6). So, can it be said that God is law-abiding? Certainly it can. That would be to say (1) that God graciously reveals laws to the creation that manifest and model his just, fair, and loving character, and (2) that God is perfectly self-consistent, never departing from his own law (e.g. Num. 23:19; Heb. 13:8; Jas 1:13-17; 1 Jn 1:5). Two things relevant to our argument follow from this. First, from Genesis to Revelation, the biblical law stated dozens of times is that the penalty for

¹ Agape, Gr. *agapē*, Strong's #G26, is pronounced *ah-gah-pay*.

defying your Creator and persisting in defiance of him is *destruction*. God created you, and if you do not live responsibly in front of your Creator, you risk eventually being removed from the creation. You risk *death*, in the strongest possible sense of that word. Not once in the Bible is it stated as a general law or principle that the penalty for misusing the gifts and powers of life is everlasting torment. So if we look at God's righteousness in terms of his consistency with the laws and principles that he has revealed to humanity throughout Scripture, then annihilation is the theory that fits perfectly with God's righteousness, *not* the theory of everlasting torment.

However, what *is* the just and fair thing for God to do in relation to beings whom he creates with the potential for eternal life, but who adamantly refuse to accept his love and kindness, and insist on living destructively? Isn't it both appropriate and just, as revealed in Isaiah 24–27 and Rev. 20:1-10, for God to punish the unrepentant impartially and fairly for their actions, and then give them one last chance to demonstrate a change in their behavior before removing them altogether from the creation? How is it either just or fair, or in character at all, for God to subject finite beings, who have done finite damage in the creation, to literally infinitely prolonged torture? I don't ask this question from a secular or rational humanist worldview: I ask it with specific reference to the *biblical* characterization of God's righteousness.

God's Holiness

Advocates of everlasting torment often appeal to God's holiness, as though *that* can justify the idea of everlasting torment. They talk as though holiness somehow equates to vindictiveness. I guess the thinking is that since God is infinitely holy, God is infinitely vindictive, therefore God will never get done taking revenge on unsaved sinners. The problem with that is that *biblical holiness has nothing to do with vindictiveness*. When we survey the words relating to holiness in the Bible, it becomes clear that the core concept of holiness is that of *purity*.¹ As this relates to God and the future of the unrepentant, I'll offer three points.

First, as I said, Scripture tells us plainly that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8, 16), so the person who affirms that God is *holy* must understand that God is *pure love*. According to Jesus, God's perfection consists precisely in the fact that he loves all people, regardless of whether they themselves love others (Mt. 5:43-48 || Lk. 6:32-36). As Jesus says, "God is kind to people who are ungrateful and evil" (Lk. 6:35). A greater contradiction can hardly be imagined than this: to affirm that God is love, and then to turn around and affirm that God creates the majority of human beings

¹ Purity is often seen as being achieved or maintained by that which is holy being separated from or kept separate from things that do not have the same special character. For example, once a vessel has been dedicated for service to God, it is no longer supposed to be exposed to substances or vessels that belong to the common (i.e. everyday) sphere. Similarly, holy people (such as priests) might have to maintain a separation from certain situations or classes of people in order to maintain their purity. The separateness, in other words, is established or maintained in service of purity.

with the prior intention of giving them a bare sliver of time to express themselves,¹ and then subjecting them to torment literally without end. Unlike the doctrine of everlasting torment, the doctrine of annihilation, when based on Isa. 27:2-5, doesn't pose a stark contradiction with the love of God, but rather glorifies the love of God *and* the fairness of God. It affirms that God loves the unrepentant so much that he provides for their amnesty and graciously offers them a taste of life, even though he foreknows that they are ultimately going to spit it out. Someone will ask, "If God foreknows that the unrepentant will ultimately have to be destroyed, why does he even create them at all?" I answer: Because he loves them enough to offer them the gift of life.

My second point is brief and simple: if we focus on the biblical idea of holiness as purity and separateness from sin, then obviously nothing would create greater separation between a Holy God and the unrepentant than their annihilation.

Thirdly, the Scriptures just as clearly associate God's holiness with his love, justice, and compassion as with his wrath:

Isa. 5:16

But the LORD of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.

Hos. 11:9

I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

The reason why passages like these can appeal to God's holiness as the explanation for the fact that he's going to act in justice and compassion is that *God is love*, and there is no trace of lovelessness in him. *God is just*, and there is no trace of injustice in him. It simply cannot be proven from Scripture that God's holiness stands in opposition either to his love or to his justice. For example, in the entire OT, there is only one verse in which "holy" (referring to God) and "wrath" occur together: Hos. 11:9, which we read just now. The words "holy" and "anger," where God's holiness is being referred to, also occur in the same verse only twice in the OT. The first is Hos. 11:9, which we just read, and the second is this:

Ezek. 43:8

⁸They they defiled my holy name by their detestable practices. So I destroyed them in my anger.

¹ For the extreme brevity of mortal life, see Job 7:6-7; 14:1-2; Ps. 37:2; 39:5; Ps. 90:5-7; 103:15-16; 144:4; Isa. 40:6-8; 51:12; Jas 1:10-11; 4:14; 1 Pet. 1:24.

These words of God in Ezekiel reveal the potential fierceness of God's holiness—when it is confronted with acts of high-handed and arrogant intrusion on that which is holy (see Ezek. 43:6-9). But this fierceness results, as in Isa. 26:10-11, in the intruder being destroyed,¹ not tortured. The same pattern holds in the other well-known OT stories of people arrogantly intruding on or attacking that which God has set apart as holy.

For example, Numbers 16 tells the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who form a coalition to rebel against Moses. Their claim is that anyone ought to be able to participate in the holy offerings, not just those appointed through Moses (Num. 16:3). They're essentially mounting a hostile takeover of the things of God. The result: the earth opens up and swallows Korah and his family, and the rebels are instantly consumed by fire from the LORD (Num. 16:28-35; 26:9-10 || Isa. 26:11). The same thing happens to Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, when they arrogantly offer unauthorized incense: "fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them" (Lev. 10:2 || Isa. 26:11). The "outbreak against Uzzah," who arrogantly reaches out to steady the ark of the covenant, which no one is allowed to touch, also results in instant death—although the text doesn't say by what means (2 Sam. 6:6-7 || 1 Chron. 13:9-10). All of these stories go to show that if you appeal to God's holiness in order to justify the idea that God has plans to torment people forever, all you accomplish is to bring to light yet more biblical precedent for the idea that instant destruction is the standard penalty for high-handedly trespassing on that which is holy to God.

This subject is deeper than it looks. What is the holiest place in all of creation, according to the scriptures? It is the "Holy of Holies," the physical place on earth that symbolically locates God's full presence.² In Solomon's Temple, this was the innermost room of the sanctuary building, where the Ark of the Covenant was housed. It was overlaid with pure gold throughout, and it was constructed with the dimensions of a cube: its length, width, and height, were all equal. What is John telling us in Rev. 21:15-18 when he reports that the length, width, and height of the New Jerusalem in the new creation are all equal, and that the city is pure gold? He's telling us that *the entire New Jerusalem is the true and ultimate Holy of Holies*, the eternal dwelling place of the full presence of God (see Rev. 21:1-3). In the same way that the sacrifices of the Old Covenant did not actually atone for sin, but pointed ahead to the real atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, so the Holy of Holies in the earthly Tent of Meeting and Temple were given as shadows and symbols of the coming reality of God's full holy presence among his holy people on earth in the new creation. Whereas John told us in Rev. 13:6 that the holy ones who love and

¹ The Hebrew word here is *kalah* (Strong's #H3615), which literally means to bring to an end or exterminate, and it is translated in the LXX by *ektribō*, which means "to rub out, expunge."

² See Exod. 26:34; 1 Kgs 6:20-21; 8:6 || 2 Chron. 5:7; Heb. 9:11-28; 10:19-20; Rev. 11:19; 15:5.

serve God in heaven *are* the temple of God, in Revelation 21 he tells us that the new creation will see the coming to earth of God and all the holy ones, and they will be one another's dwelling place for all eternity (esp. 21:1-8, 22-23).

God's fierce protectiveness of the holy people, places, and things in the OT foreshadows, points ahead, to God's fierce protectiveness of his holy people, the community of the resurrected children of God (see, yet again, Isa. 26:10-11, 19-21; 27:1-5). According to multiple scriptural precedents, an attack by the resurrected unrepentant on the "camp of the holy ones and the Beloved City" merits not capture and punishment with everlasting torment, but instant annihilation by fire (Rev. 20:8-10 and parallels). Does God harbor even the slightest ill will towards those whom he is forced to destroy in order to protect those who have taken hold of his eternal life? Read Isa. 27:4-5¹ and 57:15-21² again, and you will have your answer.

"If Hell Doesn't Exist, What's the Point of Evangelism?"

I have to admit that this argument against annihilation hurts my feelings. As a person committed to living and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, it feels as though scorn is being poured on everything that I stand for and hold dear. But rather than launching into a scathing rant, I'm going to try to be gentle. It may be that many of my readers have heard this offensive piece of foolishness so many times that they have come to assume—without thinking too hard—that this is what they themselves think. If so, let's reason together for a moment.

Are sinners happy? Do they get the better deal in life? Is living a life of sin more enjoyable and fulfilling than living a holy life as a Christian? Strictly in terms of ordinary human life and experience, are sinners usually doing just fine without salvation? Let's look at the other side of the matter. Are there any important benefits to being a Christian—apart from eternal fire insurance? Are there any joys, any spiritual comforts, any much-needed community and faithful companionship for the lonely? Is there any healing, any mutual service, any forgiveness and restoration of broken relationships and broken, destructive patterns of behavior? Is there any public justice-making to be done in the power of the Spirit, so that the oppressed and the downtrodden can be released from bondage? Finally, is there any benefit to knowing God, our Creator, and knowing God's beloved Son, Jesus Christ, God's infinitely precious gift to and for us human beings? Is there any benefit in this life to being filled with the Holy Spirit and being created anew through spiritual rebirth and regeneration? Is there any positive benefit to the gift of everlasting life? If your honest answer to the first set of questions is yes, and your honest answer to the second set of questions is no, then you're right on track in believing that there is no

¹ See p. 88 above.

² See p. 91 above.

point to evangelism unless hell is everlasting. For you, there is no real, present good news for which it is worth expending your energy, giving up all of your possessions, and risking your life. The only thing that will motivate you to share the “gospel” is fear that God will hold you accountable for other people’s infinite future torment in hell if you don’t warn them. But here’s the thing. If the only way to get the Christians in your church motivated to preach the gospel is to make them worried for their own backsides, then you haven’t converted them to any faith and experience of God through Christ that they experience as significantly better than life as a sinner. Subjectively speaking, *they don’t actually have any good news*. They don’t experience a relationship with God that is worth enough to recommend to anyone else. You also haven’t yet converted them to a relationship with God through Christ that has grown genuine love for their neighbors in their hearts. Fear that I will get in hot water with God if I don’t evangelize has nothing to do with love. It is the second-worst motivation to evangelize. The worst possible motivation is belief that God plans to torment most of humanity forever and ever. If that is your motivation, then the risk is that you will convert people to the wrong God—a God of infinite sadism rather than a God of infinite love and justice. Does my teaching about annihilation de-motivate people to proclaim that kind of “gospel”? I pray that it does.

“If a Second Chance Exists, What’s the Point of Converting?”

There are three reasons to repent and come to God now. The positive reason to convert is so that you can come alive. God your Father and Creator loves you, and his Son Jesus Christ has given his life to provide for your forgiveness and healing and full aliveness through the Holy Spirit. Do you really believe you will do better by choosing to live in sin now, and only later take hold of the infinitely good things of God? What a waste! As Paul says, people who live selfishly and for their own pleasure are dead even while they live (Rom. 8:6; 1 Tim. 5:6).

The scriptures also reveal two very compelling negative reasons to convert now. First, if you continue living in unrepentance, you will be found unworthy of taking part in the first thousand-year age of the new creation—and you will spend the equivalent of 20 life sentences in Hades, where, if you take Jesus’ word for it, you will be intensely miserable. Secondly, according to the picture painted by Isaiah and John, those who do not respond to the opportunity to come into right relationship with God in this life are destined to fall under Satan’s sway all over again in the resurrection, and they will not respond to the second chance that is given to them. It’s a paradox, but the Scripture is clear. “Look—now is the right moment; now is the day for salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). If you’re not interested in turning from blind selfishness and hatred now, you won’t be interested later. What you do in this life manifests your deeper character, a character that transcends time. “A tree is known by its fruit,” says Jesus (Mt. 12:33 || Lk. 6:44). Gambling that you can bear bad fruit

in this life and then convert to bearing good fruit in the life to come is a bet with yourself that you simply can't win. Repent and come to God now, because after this life it will be too late.

Now, when I say that it will be too late, I do not mean that God will not *let* you repent later. Saying that might give me more persuasive power over people, but it would not be truthful testimony about God. Through Jesus Christ, God has made full provision for the forgiveness of everyone's sins (Jn 1:29; 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Jn 2:1-2; 4:14). This is an eternal accomplishment. Therefore, as long as any being exists, the principle remains true: if you repent and turn from your wicked ways, you will be forgiven, and you will live (Ezek. 18:21; Acts 3:19). Thus the moment of no return for the unrepentant is not when God says to them, "From now on you can repent all you like, but I will never accept you," but rather when God says to them, "I've given you every chance to repent, and you have refused them all, even going so far as to attack those who *have* repented and have taken hold of eternal life. Your life is forfeit."

Does this whole scenario—with unrepentant humanity responding in self-deceived hostility, even when graciously invited into the new creation—seem hard to believe? Perhaps it is. Perhaps it is hard for any of us to conceive that human beings would be so absolutely stubborn in refusing the life and love of God and in choosing to live in deathliness. But I didn't make this up—I got it from the prophets Isaiah and John. God is true; we are the self-deceiving ones. God is loving and just; we are the violent ones.

Final Words of Encouragement

So you there you have it. Everything you always wanted to know about hell, but were afraid to ask. If you have studied this matter with me in sincere desire for knowledge, and not just looking for some quick proof texts to sweep away an unwanted doctrine, you might have found this scripture to be true:

Rev. 10:8

⁸The voice I'd heard from heaven spoke with me again, and said, "Go take the little scroll that's open in the right hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the land." ⁹And I went off to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take this and eat the whole thing." ¹⁰It was as sweet as honey in my mouth. But¹ when I swallowed² it, I got a stomach ache.³

Deeply knowing God's ways leads to relief and joy, but also to grief and sadness. I'll be praying for you. Keep the faith! [end of Conclusion to be rewritten]

¹ Lit. "And."

² Or "ate."

³ Lit. "my gut was bitter." See Ezek. 2:8; 3:1-3.