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THE TWO ETERNAL DESTINIES

According to the Word of God, when a person dies physically, his body goes through the decomposition process and returns to dust. The soul and spirit either go into Heaven, or into Hades, depending on the person's acceptance or rejection of the Gospel. Hades is the place where the souls of the lost go to await their trial – the Final Judgement.

The Bible speaks of different types of judgements to come in this life and the age to come for both believers and unbelievers. The judgement I would like to focus on here is the Final Judgement of the un-repentant, also referred to as the Great White Throne Judgement.

In the Book of Revelation we are given a clear description of the event and on what basis those brought before this judgement will be judged. It says they will be judged according to their works:

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.

And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them and all were judged according to what they had done.

(Revelation 20:11-14)

Here we are told that all were raised, both small and great, ordinary people and world famous personalities, to be judged and to give an account to God Almighty before His Mighty Throne. We are told that so frightening will be God's presence that both Heaven and Earth will flee from Him. *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."*

Here every living being will finally be aware that full records of his every word, deed, thought and motive had been recorded. These books will be opened and all will be judged according to what they had done. The Bible tells us that they will all be found guilty:

For no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

(Romans 3:20)

The only issue is whether a person has believed in Jesus or not; whether he has received or rejected the free pardon for which the Lord purchased with His own Life. This is the sole basis for our salvation. The Apostle John reports Jesus' own words:

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

(John 3:18-19)

This is also the meaning of Jesus' words when He predicted the special ministry of the Holy Spirit. He said:

And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement; about sin because they do not believe in me.

(John 16:8-10)

Notice this verse says that the Holy Spirit convicts the unbeliever of only one sin, because it is not his sins, plural, that will send him to destruction, but his rejection of Christ. It is important to remember, however, that to “*believe*” in Jesus means much more than just intellectual awareness, “*even the demons believe – and shudder.*” To believe in Jesus means, to rely on, cling to and obey Him.

This fact raises an important question. Since the Lord declared that those who do not believe in Him are “*condemned already,*” and so everyone who stands at the Great Throne Judgement will be in this state, what is the point of this Final Judgement? What more can be said if the case has already been decided?

The purpose of this final confrontation between God and the unsaved individual is clearly to demonstrate to him why he is already condemned.

God will take up the best works that the unsaved believed were good enough and hold them up against His own righteousness, and they will be found wanting. The unbeliever will finally have to confess that no one is good enough to stand in the presence of God based on his own merits and that God’s sentence is just. And what will that sentence be? Further on in that same passage from the Book of Revelation we are given a clear description:

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

(Revelation 20:14-15)

What Will Hell Be Like?

We are not told what the Lake of Fire is exactly, but the imagery used speaks for itself. We are given a further idea from two other biblical descriptions of hell. The first is found in Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, which says:

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord.

(2 Thessalonians 1:9)

The unjustified are shut out from God! Therefore, hell and the Lake of Fire means the permanent inaccessibility and eternal separation from God. I believe hell is also the carrying through into Eternity the foolish decisions taken in this life. The imagery Jesus uses to describe hell in the Gospel of Mark appears to confirm this. He says:

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

(Mark 9:44-45)

Jesus likens hell to maggots eating away at a dead corpse. It is so awful that He said it would be better to amputate body parts in this life rather than be sent there.

This does not mean that there are literal worms in hell or that there are worms that live forever. Jesus is describing the fact of unending suffering – the worm never stops causing torment.

Notice that Jesus says “*their*” worm, meaning the worm is personal, and identified with its owner. Many believe this is a reference to the conscience. Those in hell have a nagging, guilty

conscience that, like a persistent worm, bites, devours and torments its victim continually.

Think about this for a moment. The conscience of those condemned will be awakened and more sensitive than ever before. Their knowledge will also increase and they will know then what they do not know now.

But it will be too late! The increase in knowledge will only serve to make their folly appear more folly, because when Christ the Lover of their souls was preached to them, they despised the Truth and the servants of Truth and were content with the counterfeit. Such an awareness will cause an indescribable regret and pierce like daggers into their mind and heart, and burn like a fire that can never be quenched.

I also believe those confined to hell will be completely isolated from every other living soul, and know nothing of the whereabouts of their family and friends, which is why Jesus elsewhere refers to hell as a place of “*outer darkness*,” where there will be “*weeping and gnashing of teeth*.”

The fact that Death and Hades were also cast into the Lake of Fire means the remand prison is no longer needed, hell is the sinner’s abode and state forever, “*the second death*.”

Dear reader, the Bible’s teaching on the subject of judgement and eternal punishment in hell is quite unambiguous and is of awesome seriousness. Those who continue through life in sinful rebellion will have a fearful end. The reality of this is clearly referred to in a number of biblical texts both in the Old and New Testament (*please see table a for references*).

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

The passage of Scripture that says “*it is appointed for mortals to die once and after that the judgement,*” is one of the few affirmations in Scripture which critics are less likely to challenge. We are all assured that every human being will one day taste death. The common euphemism for death used throughout Scripture when referring to the believer is “*fall asleep*” (please see table b for references).

It is not difficult to see how this term was used, since death certainly implies some of the things which sleep implies – rest from physical labour, involvement in world events, responsibility and so on.

The Soul Sleep View

Some have gone beyond the metaphorical to the literal and argue that the use of the term “*fall asleep*” in Scripture means a cessation of all consciousness until the “*resurrection of the righteous*” at the Second Coming.

This false notion is commonly referred to as *soul sleep* and is taught by some religious cults such as the *Jehovah’s Witnesses* and the *Seven Day Adventists*. The doctrine of soul sleep maintains that when a person dies, both the soul and spirit become unconscious, while the body returns to dust.

This is not even close to what the Bible teaches and is irreconcilable with the numerous Scriptures that refer to a conscious existence during the intermediate period for both the believer and unbeliever.

Immortality of the Soul

Another non-biblical view is commonly referred to as the *immortality of the soul*, which teaches that there is a part of every human being that is divine – a piece of God within us – and that it is the soul. This is said to be the part of man that is immortal and therefore will survive death and enter Eternity forever.

Again, this is in stark contrast with the Bible's conception of what a Christian is to anticipate when Christ returns to establish His New World Order. The Christian's hope is of the continuation of full embodied life, through the power and grace of God, in the new Heaven and new Earth. It is therefore a hope of the resurrection of the body. In addition, this view is in stark contrast to the biblical doctrine of repentance, judgement and eternal condemnation, which we spoke of earlier.

The Doctrine of Purgatory

Another erroneous teaching is the Catholic doctrine of purgatory; a place where the souls of believers are said to be subject to a period of purification between death and the New Age, in preparation for the final appearance before God. Here the person suffers for a period of time to pay off the debt for his sins.

Despite the many adherents to this view, there is absolutely not a shred of biblical evidence to support such an idea. The following passage of Scripture is often quoted in favour of the position:

The work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

(1Corinthians 3:13)

When interpreted in context, we discover that this passage of Scripture concerns the judgement of the Christian's service and ministry, which will be tested by fire, in the sense that all that is unworthy in it will be removed before it can be presented to the Lord.

In the case of a careless workman, virtually all he did "for Christ" in life will be lost, though he himself will be saved "*only as through fire,*" like a man escaping from a fire which consumes all his goods but he himself is saved.

The following biblical passages are also quoted to support the notion of purgatory, although, as one can see, they do not teach such a view by any straightforward exegesis:

The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgement and a spirit of fire.

(Isaiah 4:4)

As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.

(Zechariah 9:11)

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

(Malachi 3:2)

Do not gloat over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light. Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the Lord's wrath, until he pleads my case, and establishes my right. He will bring me out into the light, I will see his righteousness.

(Micah 7:8-10)

In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

(Matthew 18:33)

The only reference that might come close to the doctrine of purgatory can be found in the non-canonical book of 2 *Maccabees* 12:42-45.

The Conditional Immortality View

Another erroneous teaching concerning the intermediate state, and concerning judgement and eternal punishment, is the conditional immortality view. This teaches that the unjustified will simply pass into oblivion either at death or at Christ's Judgement Seat. Biblical passages that use terminology such as *destruction*, *death*, *annihilation* and *perish* are used in support of this view.

The doctrine of conditional immortality also teaches that man was not created with an immortal soul, but immortality is a gift from God, given only to those who receive the Gospel and believe on Christ. The following Scripture is used to support this notion:

Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.

(John 17:1b-3)

Unbelievers are said to forfeit the opportunity to receive immortality and Eternal Life by their rejection of the Gospel. Another Scripture passage the conditional immortality view takes as support comes from Paul's First Letter to Timothy, which says:

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see, to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

(1Timothy 6:15-17)

This passage is interpreted to mean that only God is inherently immortal. Again, this is not even close to what the Bible teaches and is irreconcilable with the numerous Old and New Testament Scriptures that refer to a conscious existence during the intermediate period for both the believer and unbeliever (*please see table c for biblical references*).

The biblical description of the immortality of man is certainly and undoubtedly derived from the fact that he is a creature of God and created in His Image. So, in this sense, it is correct to say that immortality belongs to God alone. But this is not the same as saying that only God is immortal.

Moreover, when the Bible speaks of Eternal Life for believers, it is not merely referring to the continuation of existence after death, but to the Eternal Life which is the life of God *now*, in the new age of His Kingdom. The very next verse in the Gospel of John says:

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

(John 17:3-4)

The word “*know*” used here denotes intimacy instead of mere intellectual knowledge. Therefore, Eternal Life is not only living forever in the blessedness of Heaven, as opposed to being tormented in hell; it means having an intimate and personal relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ here and now.

It is, in biblical terminology, a present tense possession of a believer (see *John 3:36, 5:24, 11:26*). Therefore, the alternative to having this does not mean a person ceases to exist at death, but that he is living in the old age of sin and is separated from God and His Kingdom.

Finally, there is also the personal aspect of Final Judgement to consider. God Almighty is the Moral Governor of this Universe, and as a Righteous Governor He must punish sin and those responsible for it.

If we are to accept that the biblical term *annihilation* means cessation of conscious existence after death, it would totally deny the moral retribute element of God's justice. For example, it does not square with the biblical witness to the justice of God that people like Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin and the wicked Roman Emperors, to name a few, have passed away into an unconscious existence and will never be called to render an account for their terrible wickedness. This applies also to the notion of Soul Sleep mentioned earlier.

THE FATE OF THOSE WHO NEVER HEARD THE GOSPEL

Some Christian theologians teach that not all men and women are equal as far as their opportunity to hear the Gospel is concerned, and that this factor will be taken into account when God exercises His judgement.

They believe the basis for judgement in this case will be the person's response to God's will which was made known to them through their conscience. That is, whether they lived up to the light of conscience or not. The following passage from the Epistle to the Romans is often quoted to back up this teaching:

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

(Romans 2:14-17)

Anyone who reads this passage in its context, will see that Paul's whole purpose was not to show that the pagans can be saved by their living up to the light of nature, but to show that every living being is under condemnation.

The Jew is under condemnation because he has not lived up to the Law given to him by revelation, and the Gentile because he has not lived up to the law written in his heart.

Therefore, since all men have turned away from the light of God, whatever form that light assumed in their particular case, and are held guilty before Him, the basis for judgement for anyone who never heard the Gospel, whether before or after the redemptive work of Christ, is whether he trusted in God's grace to save him through faith, or whether he trusted in his own merits.

In the Old Testament, the saints were accepted who rendered a faithful and willing obedience to the promises made by God, thus we read in Galatians: "*Abraham believed God and his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.*" And why did God reveal Himself to the Old Testament saints and not to others? Because these saints believed "*that he exists*" and feared Him. The same applies to the Age of Grace (see *John 6:43-45*).

So while it may be argued that not all men and women are equal as far as their opportunity to hear the Gospel is concerned, the question as to why they have not heard about God's grace must be asked. Obviously, they have not wanted to hear the Gospel. If they had, the Holy Spirit would have made it possible, even by direct revelation where necessary.

Moreover, there is no excuse for anyone not seeking to know God without someone coming to him with the Good News. Though invisible, the Creator has made His existence and eternal power known to all men through the world around them. "*God has not left Himself without a witness,*" to any human being. The Judge of all the Earth will do right, said Abraham, and every mouth will be stopped in the acknowledgement of the justice of His judgements says Job.

Already Condemned before the Gospel Comes

There is one further view for the basis of judgement which requires a little clarification at this point. It is the idea that only those who reject the Gospel when they hear it will be exposed to

the Final Judgement and condemnation of God. (*Please see table d for Scriptures used to support this view*).

But these passages only prove that faith in the Messiah is the only way of salvation, which is not the same as proving that conscious rejection of Christ is the only ground for condemnation.

There is no doubt that unbelief is a great and serious matter and the form in which sin expresses itself most. However, it is not the only form of man's revolt against God, and therefore it is not the only possible ground on which man stands condemned before his Creator.

As we mentioned above, the Bible presents man as already under condemnation before the Gospel is preached to him. In other words, the effect of the Gospel is not to create and second to remove man's condemnation, but is God's gracious answer to the condemnation that already hangs over his head (*see table e for references*).

The Fate of Children Who Die Without Christ

In the Book of Romans, we read, "*I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died,*" And elsewhere, "*Apart from the law sin lies dead.*"

In other words, the sin nature of a person is not being imputed where there is no knowledge of sin and he can fellowship with God. For example, a young child is taught right from wrong, but he does not have a firm understanding that *wrong* is transgression against God.

Yet there comes a time in his life when he recognizes that he is transgressing God's Holy Law, and when that happens the Law, which is already in existence, comes to him, and from then on God imputes sin and he dies spiritually.

So, a child *does* have a sin nature, but “*sin is not reckoned where there is no law.*” Therefore, in the case of death the infant would go directly to Heaven. The truths put forward in these biblical passages also do away with the doctrine of infant baptism.

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THE MOST POPULAR MISCONCEPTION RELATED TO SALVATION

A very popular misconception about the salvation and final judgement of man is that held by the non-biblical doctrine known as *Universalism*. This view teaches that the mercy of God is of such a great extent, and the sacrifice of Christ of such great value, that He will forgive *all* and allow *everyone* into Heaven regardless of what they have done or believed during their life.

This means that anyone who rejects the Gospel when it is presented to them, or anyone who has never heard the Gospel and has not lived up to the light of God's will which comes through the conscience, will escape judgement and be granted permission to enter God's Eternal Kingdom.

Adherents to this view interpret out of context the following biblical passages to back up their erroneous teaching:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.

(Romans 5:12)

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.

(2 Corinthians 5:18-20)

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment, to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

(Ephesians 1:9-11)

Listen I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

(1Corinthians 15:51-53)

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:9-12)

This is good and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time.

(1Timothy 2:5-8)

While it is true that God's mercy is beyond human comprehension and Christ's sacrifice of such great value to extend even to the worst of sinners, and while there is something in the universalist view that accords with the longing of any kind-hearted person for

the goodness of all men, even the most wicked, it cannot be allowed to contradict the plain teaching of Scripture or distract us from estimating sin and its judgement in the light of what it all means to God.

As we stated previously, the Bible makes clear distinctions between believers in Christ and non-believers, and between those who have responded to God's grace and those who have spurned it. Consider also the following passages:

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

(2Corinthians 2:15-17)

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

(1Corinthians 1:18-19)

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God. Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

(1Corinthians 6:9-12)

Peter replied: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

(Acts 2:38-39)

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

(Acts 10:43-44)

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

(Acts 13:38-40)

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

(John 3:36)

His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

(Ephesians 2:15b-19)

The Apostle Paul glorified in the universal offer of the Gospel. It offered salvation to *all* independently of anyone's racial or social background, and of anyone's moral attainment or lack of it. But when Paul came on to the question of *how* salvation could be appropriated, he was undeviating in his insistence that sinners must repent and personally trust themselves to what God has done for them through Christ, and not through indifference or personal effort.

Therefore, in light of this biblical evidence, that speaks for itself, none of the texts which universalists quote will really make their case when we closely examine them against other plain teaching in Scripture. Even if the Scripture verses they cite were to somehow verify their position, at other points they appear impossible to square with the Bible's plain and overall teaching on the subject.

For example, when Philippians chapter two quoted above speaks of all men acknowledging Christ Jesus as Lord over all at the end of the ages, that does not mean that they will do so freely. In this case, no doctrine of universalism can be built on the fact that Christ is destined to be revealed to the world as Lord over all at His Second Coming and at the Final Judgement.

Moreover, Jesus' numerous parables on judgement are a clear indication that not all men will be saved. Consider just one of them:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you

clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

Then they will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

(Matthew 25:31-46)

Table A

Matthew 5:29-30, 10:28

Mark 9:43-48

James 3:6

1 Peter 3:19

2 Peter 2:4

Romans 1:18

2 Corinthians 2:15-16

Ephesians 2:3

Philippians 3:19

2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, 2:10

1 Thessalonians 5:3

Revelation 20:11-15

Table B

1Thessalonians 4:13-15

Matthew 27:52

John 11:11

Acts 7:60, 13:36

Table C

Ecclesiastes 12:7

Matthew 13:49-51, 25:41, 46

Revelation 19:20, 20:10, 21:8

Luke 16:19-31

Table D

John 3:18, 36

Mark 16:13-16

Romans 10:9-12

Ephesians 4:18

1John 4:3

Table E

Romans 1:18, 2:12, 5:16-18

Ephesians 2:4-5, 5:3-6

Colossians 3:5-8