

Is the “final judgment” really final?

What the Bible doesn't say about hell

by [David Bentley Hart](#) in the [September 25, 2019](#) issue



Judgment Day, dome in the Florence Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Italy

There is a general sense among most Christians that the notion of an eternal hell is explicitly and unremittingly advanced in the New Testament; and yet, when we go looking for it in the actual pages of the text, it proves remarkably elusive. The whole idea is, for instance, entirely absent from the Pauline corpus, as even the thinnest shadow of a hint. Nor is it anywhere patently present in any of the other epistolary texts. There is one verse in the gospels, Matthew 25:46, that—at least, as traditionally understood—offers what seems the strongest evidence for the idea (though even there the wording leaves room for considerable doubt regarding its true significance); and then there are perhaps a couple of verses from Revelation (though, as ever when dealing with that particular book, caveat lector). Beyond that, nothing is clear.

In fact, the New Testament provides us with a number of fragmentary and fantastic images that can be taken in any number of ways, arranged according to our prejudices and expectations, and declared literal or figural or hyperbolic as our

desires dictate. True, Jesus speaks of a final judgment and uses many metaphors to describe the unhappy lot of the condemned.

Many of these are metaphors of destruction, like the annihilation of chaff or brambles in ovens, or the final death of body and soul in the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna). Others are metaphors of exclusion, like the sealed doors of wedding feasts. A few, a very few, are images of imprisonment and torture; but even then, in the relevant verses, those punishments are depicted as having only a limited term (Matt. 5:36, 18:34; Luke 12:47–48, 59). Nowhere is there any description of a kingdom of perpetual cruelty presided over by Satan, as though he were a kind of chthonian god.

On the other hand, however, there are a remarkable number of passages in the New Testament, several of them from Paul's writings, that appear instead to promise a final salvation of all persons and all things, and in the most unqualified terms. I imagine some or most of these latter could be explained away as rhetorical exaggeration; but then, presumably, the same could be said of those verses that appear to presage an everlasting division between the redeemed and the reprobate.

To me it is surpassingly strange that, down the centuries, most Christians have come to believe that one class of claims—all of which are allegorical, pictorial, vague, and metaphorical in form—must be regarded as providing the “literal” content of the New Testament's teaching regarding the world to come, while another class—all of which are invariably straightforward doctrinal statements—must be regarded as mere hyperbole. It is one of the great mysteries of Christian history (or perhaps of a certain kind of religious psychopathology).

It is certainly curious also that so many Christians are able to recognize that the language of scripture is full of metaphor, on just about every page, and yet fail to notice that, when it comes to descriptions of the world to come, there are no non-metaphorical images at all. Why precisely this should be I cannot say. We can see that the ovens are metaphors, and the wheat and the chaff, and the angelic harvest, and the barred doors, and the debtors' prisons; so why do we not also recognize that the deathless worm and the inextinguishable fire and all other such images (none of which, again, means quite what the infernalist imagines) are themselves mere figural devices within the embrace of an extravagant apocalyptic imagery that, in itself, has no strictly literal elements? How did some images become *mere* images in the general Christian imagination while others became exact documentary portraits

of some final reality?

The whole idea of hell is remarkably elusive in the New Testament.

If one can be swayed simply by the brute force of arithmetic, it seems worth noting that, among the apparently most explicit statements on the last things, the universalist statements are by far the more numerous. I am thinking of such verses as, say, Romans 5:18-19:

So, then, just as through one transgression came condemnation for all human beings, so also through one act of righteousness came a rectification of life for all human beings; for, just as by the heedlessness of the one man the many were rendered sinners, so also by the obedience of the one the many will be rendered righteous. (My translation; see *The New Testament: A Translation*)

Or 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For just as in Adam all die, so also in the Anointed [Christ] all will be given life." Or 2 Corinthians 5:14: "For the love of the Anointed constrains us, having reached this judgment: that one died on behalf of all; all then have died." Or even Romans 11:32: "For God shut up everyone in obstinacy so that he might show mercy to everyone."

Or, of course, 1 Timothy 2:3-6: "our savior God, who intends all human beings to be saved and to come to a full knowledge of truth. For there is one God, and also one mediator of God and human beings: a human being, the Anointed One Jesus, who gave himself as a liberation fee for all." And Titus 2:11: "For the grace of God has appeared, giving salvation to all human beings."

And 2 Corinthians 5:19: "Thus God was in the Anointed reconciling the cosmos to himself, not accounting their trespasses to them, and placing in us the word of reconciliation." As well as Ephesians 1:9-10: "Making known to us the mystery of his will, which was his purpose in him, for a husbandry of the seasons' fullness, to recapitulate all things in the Anointed, the things in the heavens and the things on earth."

And presumably Colossians 1:27-28: "By whom God wished to make known what the wealth of this mystery's glory is among the gentiles, which is the Anointed within you, the hope of glory, whom we proclaim, warning every human being and teaching

every human being in all wisdom, so that we may present every human being as perfected in the Anointed.” And surely John 12:32: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will drag everyone to me.”

And perhaps Hebrews 2:9: “But we see Jesus, who was made just a little less than angels, having been crowned with glory and honor on account of suffering death, so that by God’s grace he might taste of death on behalf of everyone.” And then there is the elegantly condensed syllogism (or enthymeme) in John 17:2: “Just as you gave him power over all flesh, so that you have given everything to him, that he might give them life in the Age.”

And this, from John 4:42: “And they said to the woman: ‘We no longer have faith on account of your talk; for we ourselves have listened and we know that this man is truly the savior of the cosmos.’” Which is confirmed in John 12:47: “for I came not that I might judge the cosmos, but that I might save the cosmos.” And 1 John 4:14: “And we have seen and attest that the Father has sent the Son as savior of the cosmos.”

There is, as well, 2 Peter 3:9: “The Lord is not delaying what is promised, as some reckon delay, but is magnanimous toward you, intending for no one to perish, but rather for all to advance to a change of heart.” Maybe even Matthew 18:14: “So it is not a desire that occurs to your Father in the heavens that one of these little ones should perish.”

And Philippians 2:9–11: “For which reason God also exalted him on high and graced him with the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend—of beings heavenly and earthly and subterranean—and every tongue gladly confess that Jesus the Anointed is Lord, for the glory of God the Father.”

And Colossians 1:19–20: “For in him all the Fullness was pleased to take up a dwelling, and through him to reconcile all things to him, making peace by the blood of his cross [through him], whether the things on the earth or the things in the heavens.”

And most definitely 1 John 2:2: “And he is atonement for our sins, and not only for ours, but for the whole cosmos.” And such mysterious verses as: John 3:17: “For God sent the Son into the cosmos not that he might condemn the cosmos, but that the cosmos might be saved through him.”

And Luke 16:16: “Until John, there were the Law and the prophets; since then the good tidings of God’s Kingdom are being proclaimed, and everyone is being forced [*βιάζεται*, *biazetai*] into it” (at least, if *biazetai*, is read as having the passive force, as I believe to be correct).

And then, of course, there is 1 Timothy 4:10: “we have hoped in a living God who is the savior of all human beings, especially [*μάλιστα*, *malista*] those who have faith.” I could continue, but this might be an auspicious place to pause, at the point of that odd, disorientating final qualification—that *malista*: “especially.” What, after all, could it possibly mean?

For a “hopeful universalist” like Hans Urs von Balthasar, scripture confronts us with something like a dialectical oscillation between two kinds of absolute statements, both indissoluble in themselves and each seemingly irreconcilable with the other. And we are supposedly forbidden—by piety, by doctrine, by prudence—from attempting to decide between them. We can at most juxtapose verses of the sort I have just quoted (along with others of the same sort) with other, more ominous verses that speak of a future discrimination between the righteous and the reprobate and of an eschatological exclusion or destruction of the wicked.

Beyond the crucifixion of history lies the universal restoration of all things.

Having done this, supposedly, we must then try prayerfully to hold the two seemingly antinomous sides of scripture’s testimony in a sustained “tension,” without attempting any sort of final resolution or synthesis between them. In so doing, apparently, we learn to wait on God in a salutary condition of charity toward all and salubrious fear for ourselves—of a joyous certitude regarding the glorious power of God’s love and a terrible consciousness of the dreadful might of sin.

Perhaps this is the right way of balancing things out, but I am inclined to think not. I see no great virtue in vacillation, especially when it seems like a strategy for crediting oneself with a tenderheartedness that one might nevertheless be willing to doubt in God. This whole posture looks uncomfortably like intellectual timidity to me. Moreover, it seems to encompass just a little too much post-Hegelian dialectical disenchantment, as well perhaps as a touch of disingenuous obscurantism; at least, I cannot quite suppress my suspicion that here the word *tension* is being used merely as an anodyne euphemism for *contradiction*. And, frankly, I have no great interest in waiting upon God, to see if in the end he will prove to be better or worse than I

might have hoped.

For myself, I prefer a much older, more expansive, perhaps overly systematic approach to the seemingly contrary eschatological expectations unfolded in the New Testament—an approach like Gregory of Nyssa's or Origen's, according to which the two sides of the New Testament's eschatological language represent not two antithetical possibilities tantalizingly or menacingly dangled before us, posed one against the other as challenges to faith and discernment, but rather two different moments within a seamless narrative, two distinct eschatological horizons, one enclosed within the other.

In this way of seeing the matter, one set of images marks the furthest limit of the immanent course of history and the division therein—right at the threshold between this age and the “Age to come” (*'olam ha-ba*, in Hebrew)—between those who have surrendered to God's love and those who have not. The other set refers to that final horizon of all horizons, “beyond all ages,” where even those who have traveled as far from God as it is possible to go, through every possible self-imposed hell, will at the last find themselves in the home to which they are called from everlasting, their hearts purged of every last residue of hatred and pride.

Each horizon is, of course, absolute within its own sphere: one is the final verdict on the totality of human history, the other the final verdict on the eternal purposes of God—just as the judgment of the cross is a verdict upon the violence and cruelty of human order and human history, and Easter the verdict upon creation as conceived in God's eternal counsels. The eschatological discrimination between heaven and hell is the crucifixion of history, while the final universal restoration of all things is the Easter of creation.

This way of seeing the matter certainly seems, at any rate, to make particularly cogent sense of the grand eschatological vision of 1 Corinthians 15. At least, Paul certainly appears to speak there, especially in verses 23–24, of three distinct moments, distributed across two eschatological frames, in the process of the final restoration of the created order in God: “And each in the proper order: the Anointed as the firstfruits, thereafter those who are in the Anointed at his arrival, then the full completion, when he delivers the Kingdom to him who is God and Father, when he renders every Principality and every Authority and Power ineffectual.”

Only at the very end of these three stages, then—first the exaltation of Christ, then the exaltation at history's end of those already fully united to Christ, and then the "full completion" at the end of all ages, when the Kingdom is yielded over to the Father—do we arrive at the promise of verse 28: "And, when all things have been subordinated to him, then will the Son himself also be subordinated to the one who has subordinated all things to him, so that God may be all in all."

After all, though Paul speaks on more than one occasion of the judgment to come, it seems worth noting that the only picture he actually provides of that final reckoning is the one found in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, the last two verses of which identify only two classes of the judged: those saved in and through their works and those saved by way of the fiery destruction of their works. "If the work that someone has built endures, that one will receive a reward; if anyone's work should be burned away, that one will suffer loss, yet shall be saved, even though as by fire."

If Paul means us to understand that there will also be yet another class—that of the eternally derelict—he does not say so. And though, admittedly, later tradition has tended to take these verses as referring only to two distinct divisions within the limited company of the elect, Paul certainly says nothing of the sort.

If Paul really believed that the alternative to life in Christ is eternal torment, it seems fairly careless of him to have omitted any mention of the fact. In every instance in which he names the stakes of our relation to Christ, he describes salvation as rescue from death, not from perpetual torture. It is traditional to take "death" here as meaning "spiritual death," which really means not death in any obligingly literal and terminal sense, but instead endless agony in separation from God. But Paul would have had to be something of a cretin not to have made that absolutely clear if that was indeed what he intended his readers to understand.

I suppose one cannot discuss New Testament eschatology without considering the book of Revelation. I have to be honest, though: I tend not to think of it as a book about eschatology as such. True, the book does contain a few especially piquant pictures of final perdition, if that is what one chooses to cling to as something apparently solid and buoyant amid the whelming floods of all that hallucinatory imagery; but, even then, the damnation those passages describe chiefly falls upon patently allegorical figures like "Hades" (death personified) or "the Beast" (Rome "brutified"), which hardly seems to allow for much in the way of doctrinal exactitude. As it happens, the text also contains a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes,

horses with lions' heads and tails like serpents, giant angels, locusts with iron thoraxes, a dragon with seven heads and ten horns and wearing seven diadems, a great whore seated on the beast and bearing a chalice full of abominations, a gigantic city with streets of transparent gold . . . (and so on and so forth). One would have to be something of a lunatic to mistake any of it for a straightforward statement of dogma.

For myself, for what it is worth, I do not even really think that Revelation is a book about the end of time so much as a manifesto written in figurative code by a Jewish Christian who believed in keeping the law of Moses but who also believed that Jesus was the Messiah. It is for the most part, as far as I can tell, an extravagantly allegorical prophecy not about the end of history as such but about the inauguration of a new historical epoch in which Rome will have fallen, Jerusalem will have been restored, and the Messiah will have been given power "to rule the gentiles with a rod of iron."

And this new epoch, so the text clearly seems to announce, will not even really lie beyond history as a continuing reality: there will still, it tells us, be kings and gentile peoples beyond the walls of God's city, walking in its light and invited to enter through its open gates. To me, it is all a religious and political fable, principally concerned with Rome and Judaea in the closing decades of the first century and written in extremely obscure symbols for a community that already understood their hidden meanings.

However, if one chooses to read Revelation entirely as a picture of the final judgment of all creation, and of the great last assize of all souls, one must then also account for the seeming paradox of a prophesied final judgment—one that includes a final discrimination between the saved and the damned—that will nevertheless be succeeded by a new Age in which the gates of the restored Jerusalem will be thrown open and precisely those who have been left outside the walls and putatively excluded forever from the Kingdom will be invited to wash their garments, enter the city, and drink from the waters of life.

If John's apocalypse really is about the end of all things, then it can clearly be taken as promising two distinct resolutions to fallen time: the end of history in a final judgment and then, beyond that, the end of judgment in a final reconciliation.

This article is excerpted from That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation by David Bentley Hart. Published by Yale University Press in September

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