Part A: Salvation, Part B: Judgment, Part C: The Ages to Come

C-1: Fate of Judas
C-2: Rewards, Rehabilitation, or Both?
C-3: A Word of Comfort
C-4: *"Everlasting Punishment. . . Forever and Ever"* – Meaning?
C-5: Deliverance from the Lake of Fire? Society of the Future!
C-6: Lake of Fire – What Is It For?
C-7: Conclusion

*

C-4: *"Everlasting Punishment… Forever and Ever"* – Meaning?

In the realm of Christian teaching, the spiritual forces of Darkness like to sneak in and push the idea of God as a merciless tyrant. And one way that has happened is through mistranslation of certain Scriptures about God's dealings with evildoers. It also happens through misguided teaching and preaching of pastors and evangelists who can mis-apply the Scriptures in a way that helps them to maintain control over their flocks.

And if the "merciless tyrant" view of God doesn't seem to be working, the forces of Darkness will try to swing it in the other direction – with so much emphasis on God's grace and mercy that people figure they can get away with anything without having to pay the price or face the consequences.

So now, regarding this word *"everlasting"*, in our language it means "time without end". But is this really correct? "Time without end" sounds foreboding – especially if we hear it in phrases like *"everlasting punishment"* or *"everlasting torment"*. But this time-without-end concept is not the most accurate way to understand this word. And it might be better to substitute in its place words like "supernatural" or "in the Realm Beyond".

In the New Testament there are two Greek words used to express a stretched-out concept of time: *aion* and *aionios*. The words are obviously related to each other; *aion* is the noun and means "age", while *aionios* is the adjective and, according to strict grammatical rules, means "age-

lasting".

The word *aion* in most Bible versions is translated as "age" or "world". *Aionios* is usually translated as *"eternal"* or *"everlasting"*. *Aion*, when used by itself, is found in expressions like *"this present evil age"* or *"end of the age"* or *"age to come"*. (Galatians 1:4, Matthew 24:3, 28:20, Mark 10:30) When combined with *eis* (meaning in/into), it is translated as *"forever"* (even though "for an age" or "into an age" would be more accurate).

Unlike *aion*, *aionios* points more to the supernatural Realm – that which lies beyond the physical environment and our physical senses. The expression "everlasting (*aionios*) life" could be rendered as "age-lasting life". But "life" which lasts for an "age" stretches far beyond our short earthly life span. And where else can such "life" exist but in the spiritual realm? So instead of "everlasting life", we could word it as "beyond-earthly-reality life".

The question will come to mind: Should these words be used to express a long span of time that has an end? This is what the more literal and strict definitions would suggest" "world/age" for *aion* and "age-lasting" for *aionios*). Or can they be used to express a span of time that is absolutely never-ending as suggested by the translations of *"forever"* (for *aion*) and *"eternal/everlasting"* (for *aionios*)?

The following Scripture offers a helpful clue (both words are used in the same passage): *"there is no one who* [has sacrificed]… *for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now… and in the age* [aion] *to come, eternal* [aionios] *life*." (Mark 10:30) The future *"age"* (*aion*) is an era of physical time in our earthly environment, and the phrase *"eternal* [*aionios*] *life"* simply means "age-lasting life"; but more than just physical time, it suggests spiritual reality – the supernatural peace and blessings of God that will one day merge with us and our earthly environment.

Another helpful Scripture: *"For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."* (2Corinthians 4:18) In this passage, the word *"eternal"* (*aionios*) points to that which lies beyond our realm of space and time (*"the things which are not seen"*).

In the strictest sense *aionios* means "age-lasting". But in most Scriptures where it appears, *aionias* transcends this literal meaning – not in the sense of adding infinitely more time (as suggested in the translations of *"everlasting/eternal"*). Rather than it being a question of length of time, *aionias* is used to express the idea of beyond time. Rather than describing passing earthly reality, *aionias* is used to refer to the enduring realm of spiritual reality. This Celestial Region exists beyond the boundaries of time and space and is a realm that our finite, time-bound minds cannot easily grapple with.

So, when referring to the Earthly Realm, the Greek word *aion* is normally used. When referring to the Celestial Realm, the Greek word *aionios* is used and is translated as *"eternal"* or *"everlasting"* in most Bibles. (But no earthly words can ever grasp the full reality.) Common definitions of *aionios* are "without beginning or end", "without end". These would certainly apply well to the nature of God Himself. But this seems to be a multi-faceted word, and there are a couple of other definitions worth considering:

- ***Aionios* accordingly is especially adapted to supersensuous things. (*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, page 21. Published 1901)**
- **(*Aiṓnios*) does not focus on the future *per se*, but rather on the *quality* of the *age* (165 */aiṓn*) it relates to. Thus believers live in "*eternal* (166 */aiṓnios*) life" right *now*, experiencing this *quality of God's life* now as a *present possession*. (Note the Gk *present* tense of *having* eternal life in Jn 3:36, 5:24, 6:47; cf. Ro 6:23.)**
  [from HELPS Word-studies in *Discovery Bible,* 2021]

If *aionios* can refer to "supersensuous things" (meaning that which belongs to the realm beyond our earthly senses), or if it refers to the "quality of the (heavenly) age", then it is not, strictly speaking, referring to length of time.

When Paul was counselling Timothy, he wrote, *"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil… But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal* [aionios] *life."* To those *"who are rich in this present age* [aion]", Paul exhorts *"that they be rich in good*

works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life." **(1Timothy 6:10-12,17-19)**

It is so easy to chase after what we can see (like money and what it can buy). We strive and labor for that dream job, that dream house, that graduation day; we pin all our hopes and desires on such things. Yet when it comes to working towards our "graduation" from this life, we can attach so little importance to it, thinking perhaps that it's all in God's hands and we have nothing to do with it.

If we had the same urgency about preparing for the next life as we do for some of the goals that we place so much importance on in our earthly lives, how different our lives would be! Probably we would do everything possible to make sure our activities were glorifying God instead of advancing and glorifying our temporary time in the earthly realm.

That is what those of faith aim for – the virtues of righteousness, etc. – and ultimately for *"eternal life"*. They *"lay hold"* on the unseen, which is more difficult, but in the end more enduring and rewarding – that which is *"everlasting"* (*aionios*).

In the Gospel of John we learn that Jesus exhorted his followers to drink of His *"water"* as it would become *"a fountain of water springing up into everlasting* [aionios] *life."* (John 4:14) He also said, *"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting* [aionios] *life."* (John 6:27) Normally, we drink water and labor for food that we can see, in order to keep our bodies alive and healthy. But here Christ is pointing to unseen realities and encouraging His followers to pursue this very real nourishment.

Although this nourishment exists beyond the reach of our physical senses, it does quench the thirst and feed the hunger of our spirits. So with this word *"everlasting"*, Christ is not trying to emphasize a long age of time, nor even the future Golden Age, as much as He is pointing to the *"life"* that is unseen and spiritual, yet permanent and enduring… in that it stays with us into the next life.

We may conclude then that the *New Testament* authors used the word

aionios **to mean "beyond time", pointing to the Celestial Realm whose time boundaries are different from what we know in our Earthly Realm.**

When we enter that Celestial Realm at the time of death, we cannot bring with us our earthly possessions – our physical baggage; but we do carry with us the spiritual baggage of weights and sins from the past, along with, of course, our good deeds and positive influence from our earthly lives. For those who have a lot of the wrong kind of baggage, it may seem to take "forever" before they can ditch that baggage and find release from the "shame" of having it in a heavenly environment where all is perfection and beauty and freedom.

That "forever" feeling is something probably we can all relate to – a time of distress that seems to last "forever". As fallen human beings, it is impossible for us to avoid at some point in our lives the need for some correction. The peculiar thing about these experiences (and we've all had them) is that, while in the middle of them, we think it's never going to end. In our short-sighted view we see no hope for change or release. It seems like time without end.

The emotional outpourings of the Psalms express sometimes this anxious, pessimistic viewpoint. ***"Will you be angry with us forever?"*** **(Psalm 85:5; also 13:1, 74:1, 79:5, 89:46) And we may wonder too about this phrase, appearing frequently in the New Testament: the** ***"wrath of God"*****.**

Admittedly, it sounds foreboding. In many ancient societies the "gods" were perceived as somewhat unfriendly and had to be placated in order to avoid inviting their anger upon the human race. And even among Christians, it is easy to slip into a mindset that thinks of God as a similar kind of Being who is apt to get angry with us whenever we might slip the slightest bit out of line. But the example of Jesus, who always referred to God as "Father", became the illustration for us of how God the Father actually feels towards the human race.

But still, we might wonder how, for example, in John 3, we read, ***"God so loved the world… did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."*** **(3:16-17) Then a little further we read,** ***"he who does not believe the Son shall not see life,***

***but the wrath of God abides on him."* (3:36)**

***"Wrath"* may not be the best translation to convey what was originally meant in this Scripture. That particular word expresses a kind of vengeful, fearsome anger that doesn't seem to jibe with what the passage said in verses 16-17 about the love of God. There are two Greek words that were translated as wrath or anger: *orge* and *thumos.* Here is a definition of these words from *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Joseph Thayer, 1889:**

> ***Orge…* The *orge* attributed to God in the N.T. is *that in God which stands opposed to man's disobedience, obduracy* (esp. in resisting the gospel) *and sin, and manifests itself in punishing the same*: Jn 3:36; etc. (pg. 457)**
>
> ***Thumos… passion, angry heat… anger forthwith boiling up and soon subsiding again*, (*orge,* on the other hand, denotes *indignation which has arisen gradually and become more settled…*) (pg. 293)**

The Greek word used in John 3:36 is *orge.* Accordingly, a better translation might go like this: "Those who consciously reject and refuse to believe will not be gifted with the life of God but will instead find themselves in the camp of opposition to God (and thus will have to suffer the consequences of being outside of God's presence and blessing)."

Furthermore, the phrase *"believes not"* in *"he that believes not the son"* means "to be disobedient". Nowadays however, the word "believe" has a mild sort of meaning: to regard something as true. So this passage is addressing the more serious issue of rebellion and disobedience. (For more information on this subject, see here in Post "Wrath of God 1".)

To re-word this passage of John 3:36, it might go like this: "He who believes in and obeys the Son has God's favor (everlasting life); and he who rebels and disobeys and does not believe the Son shall not see life (God's favor), but the disfavor and indignation of God abides on him." Hopefully, this conveys better what is meant here in John 3:36.

***"Wrath of God"* is a phrase that we would think applies well to those times when God's judgments are sent, such as what we read about in the**

Book of Revelation. **And that is where the Greek word *thumos* (when applied to God's anger) appears. It expresses well His Indignation. Evil has held sway long enough in the Earth, and the day has come for it to be swept away. And when God gets angry, the repercussions in the Earth will be colossal and monumental. (But He has told us ahead of time what to expect and has guaranteed protection for those who are His followers during that final era in Earth's history.)**

Anyway, getting back to the *Old Testament*, to the Israelites, when God was displeased with them because of their going astray, they felt that the "punishment" (removal of blessing really, but often expressed as God's anger) seemed to last *"forever"*. But of course, it wasn't *"forever"*, and the "complaint" Psalms always end on an upbeat note, recognizing that God is faithful and would restore His people once they have done their part to repent and change.

Now for those who don't know God and His power and love, it is easy to fall into a state of total despair. So that is one way the word *"forever"* is accurate. But when faith enters the picture, that changes things. Faith knows there is a loving Creator, and He can change things. *"I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living."* (Psalm 27:13)

As a prisoner who learns repentance and rehabilitation and is released, in a similar way many who land in that reformatory known as *"shame and everlasting disgrace"* will, as they repent and reject their sinful habits and attitudes, eventually enter a state of greater freedom and privilege.

And that, after all, is God's aim through "punishment" – training. It's not just to make us feel bad and that's the end of it. God's universe is far from static; it is ever-moving, flowing, and changing. And His goal and desire is to transform us into better and happier individuals. If they seek and desire change, human souls will not find themselves trapped forever in some less-than-desirable station in the Afterlife.

When Jesus spoke of *"everlasting punishment"* (in Matthew 25:46), the terms used in this statement reflect God's viewpoint of punishment as correction or training for the individual concerned. The translation of *"punishment"* (for the Greek *kolasis*) does not convey the full meaning,

which is better expressed in the following definitions:

- **"Pruning, restraint, restraining" (*Young's Analytical Concordance*)**
- ***Correction, punishment, penalty…* [SYN. *kolasis, timoria*: the noted definition of Aristotle which distinguishes *kolasis* from *timoria* as that which (is disciplinary and) has reference to him who suffers, while the latter (is penal and) has reference to the satisfaction of him who inflicts…] (*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, pg. 353)**

The above definition mentions the Greek word *timoria* (to punish), which emphasizes the satisfaction of the one inflicting punishment (as when Paul, before his conversion, was "punishing" Christians). But Jesus' concept of punishment was not a vengeful thing (*timoria*) but was *kolasis* – the kind of "punishment" that restrains evildoers while at the same time providing them with the correction and pruning they need to cause them to change and grow in the right direction.

So if we combine *kolasis* (God's view of punishment) with a truer understanding of the word *"everlasting"*, we might re-phrase *"everlasting punishment"* as "a period of training upon entrance into the Afterlife for those whose earthly lives were not lived in accordance with God's ways".

So, if *"punishment"* means "restraint and correction", and if the training has its desired effects, then God, whom we know is fair, just and merciful, will surely release repentant souls into a state of greater blessedness. To think of "punishment" without any possibility of release does not make sense. If that really were the case, then why would any soul bother making the effort to turn to the Light; might as well just keep on being "bad" if there's no hope of reward for turning away from evil.

Unfortunately though, the idea of "infinite punishment" for evildoers is the usual concept promoted in most commentaries and study Bibles. A better translation of *"everlasting punishment"* might be "correction/chastisement/refining in the Realm Beyond"; and *"everlasting life"* could be translated "life and ecstasy in the Realm Beyond"

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *olam* covers several ways of expressing a long span of time – from something as short as a man's

lifetime (*"he shall be your servant forever"* – Deuteronomy 15:17) to an age of history (*"remember the days of old"* – Deuteronomy 32:7) and to the realm existing beyond time (*"everlasting life"*, *"Him who lives forever"* – Daniel 12:2,7). And here is one general definition of the word *olam*:

> **"What is hidden; specially *hidden time, long;* the beginning or end of which is either uncertain or else not defined; *eternity, perpetuity*." (*Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, pg 612, by H.W.F. Gesenius)**

Time that is "hidden" and "not defined" doesn't have to mean "time without end", which is what our English translations generally imply by using the word *"everlasting"* or *"forever"* or *"forever and ever"*. "Time without end" would apply to God Himself, but for other things, the idea of "not defined" is more applicable.

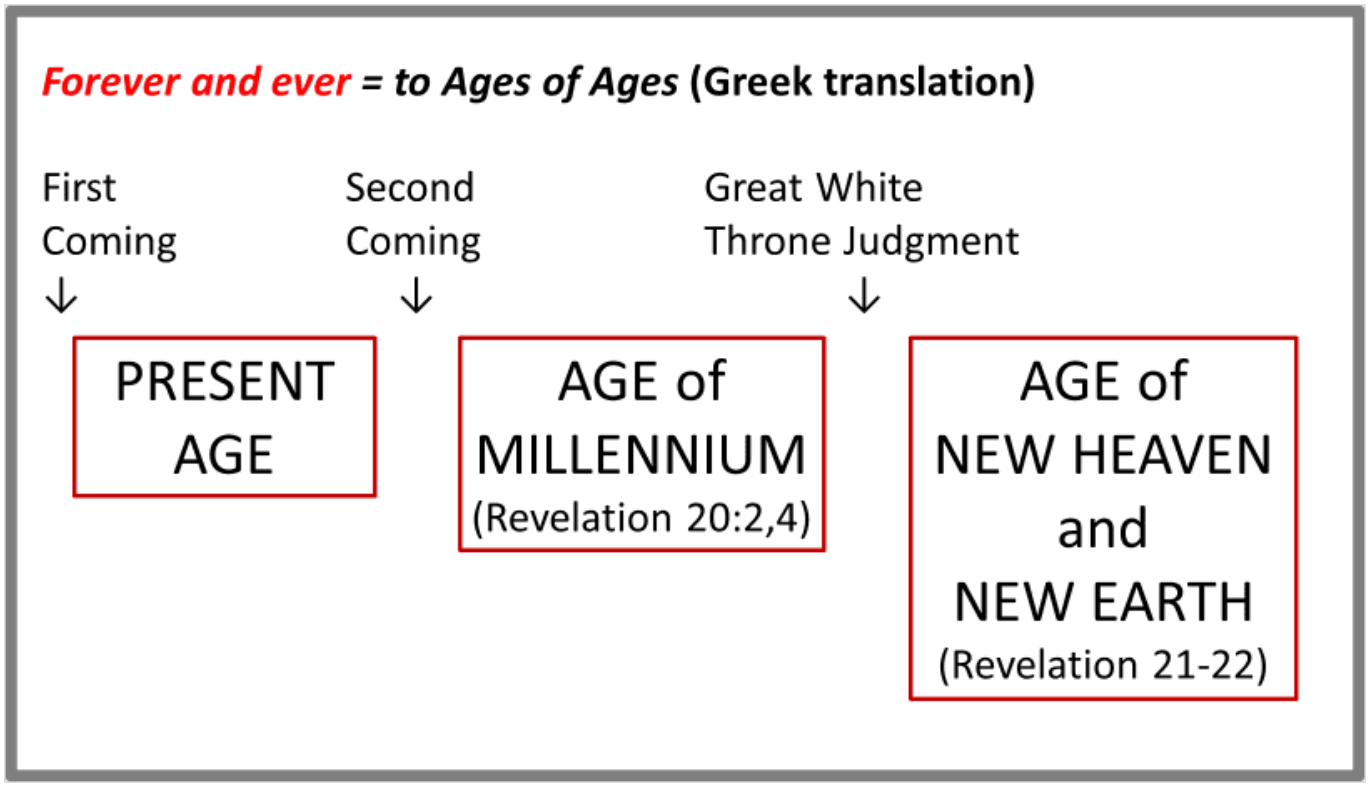
That leaves the matter open-ended, and leaves room for any number of correctional regimes and time spans – all tailored to suit the needs of the soul for whom they are designed. The "punishment" that some will have to endure is not "forever"; it is just not known how long it will be. That "not knowing" aspect may make it seem like "forever", especially for those having to undergo a correctional regime of some kind. The actual length of time would depend, presumably, on the attitude of the soul undergoing the re-training process (or "punishment" if we want to call it that).

This perspective of time being "hidden" or "uncertain" or "not defined" has become obscured nowadays because of how certain passages have been translated – with the phrase *"forever and ever"* in reference to punishment in the Afterlife.

If some souls never respond to the Light – and there may be some who fall into that category – then in that case, of course, their sojourn in Hell or the Lake of Fire would last "forever".

In our language the *"forever and ever"* phrase evokes no small amount of dread when applied to punishment in the Afterlife for evil-doers. The Greek phrase, *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, in its most literal sense, means

"<u>into</u> the ages of the ages". (Both *aionas* and *aionon* derive from *aion*, not *aionias*.) This phrase is akin to other phrases like *"holy of holies", "King of kings", "Lord of lords"*. It points to an ultimate future "Age" which is superior to all past ages.



And since the word *aion* is used (not *aioinias*), this points, not to a <u>vague</u> *"forever and ever"* future somewhere in the <u>spiritual</u> realm, but to a <u>definite</u> future era in <u>Earth's</u> history – or rather, the two eras of the 1,000-year reign of Christ and His saints, followed by the Age of the New Heaven and Earth (as outlined in Revelation 20-22). This is the final goal of human history (or final enough as far as we need be concerned).

Greek Words *aion* [αιων] and *aionios* [αιωνιος]

Greek Word	Strict Meaning	Common Translation	Original Intended Meaning	Misunderstood Meaning
Aion	Age, world	Age, world	Age, world	--
Eis tous aionas ton aionon	Into/in the Ages of the Ages	Forever and ever	Lengthy, undefined time span during Ages of Millennium, New Earth & Heaven	Time without end, infinity
Aionios	Age-lasting	Everlasting, eternal	In the Realm/Age beyond "time" as we know it Supernatural Enduring	Time without end, infinity

Without going into a lot of detail, following is a brief explanation about these future Ages:

After Christ's Second Coming begins the Age of the Millennium when Christ and His saints shall rule in an Earth inhabited by those who survived the convulsions that rocked the Earth at the end of our present Age.

Then after the 1,000-year Age of the Millennium, another "end of the world" cataclysm will take place: *"the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up."* (2Peter 3:10) God will re-create the surface of the Earth and its atmosphere to establish *"a new heaven and a new earth"*; in addition, the Heavenly City will come *"down out of heaven from God"*. (Revelation 21:1-2)

At about the same time, the Great White Throne Judgment will take place, and all souls who were not part of the *First Resurrection* at the end of our present Age will be judged at this later time; they will be sent, either to the *Lake of Fire* or to a heavenly destination. And thus begins

that unimaginably glorious Age of the *New Heaven and New Earth* when *"God Himself will be with them and be their God."* (Revelation 21:3)

So how are we to understand these forbidding phrases in the Bible: *"the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night"* and *"they will be tormented day and night forever and ever"*? (Revelation 14:11, 20:10) (See what *Expositor's Bible Commentary* has to say on this passage in Appendix.)

First of all, we need to understand that *"forever and ever"* (*eis tous aionas ton aionon*) refers to definite future ages of Earth's history. Secondly, the Greek preposition *eis*, which means something like "into" or "in", means that the punishment is destined to carry on into those future Ages, which is not the same as perpetuating into a vague and timeless infinity. The *"forever and ever"* phrase is supposed to focus on the "when" of that future punishment, not the "how long".

And when those Days of Judgment come, the *"meek"* who are destined to *"inherit the earth"* will, of course, be spared from "separation" and will have the privilege of entering those glorious future Ages of Peace. (Matthew 5:5) The evildoers and unrepentant, on the other hand, will find themselves locked out, confined to the realm of *Hades,* or herded, with Satan and his demons, to their unhappy fate in the Lake of Fire. And as there are two Ages of glory, peace, and freedom for the righteous, it seems there will also be two ages of misery, shame, and confinement for evildoers.

At the beginning of the Millennium, we learn that *"the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet… These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone."* (Revelation 19:20) This may include also a good many of their followers, as Revelation 14:9-11 would indicate about those who worshiped the *Beast*. Then again, at the start of the Age of the *New Heaven and Earth*, at the *Great White Throne Judgment*, the *Lake of Fire* receives a new influx of inhabitants, including Satan and probably the rest of his demons who are not already there.

When Jesus confronted the demons in *"the country of the Gergesenes… they cried out, saying, 'What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?'"* (Matthew

8:29) Evidently, they knew their time had not yet come. The Son of God was there *"in the likeness of men"*, but control over Earth's government had not yet passed into His hands. (Philippians 2:7) So the demons insisted that they should not be tormented *"before the time"*.

But when the Kingdom of God does come, when the "ages of the ages" is established on Earth, then will begin their punishment. It will start with Satan being driven out of heaven and *"cast to the earth"*, then incarcerated – *"cast into the bottomless pit."* (Revelation 12:8-9, 20:3) And presumably, his angels also, who were *"cast out with him"* onto the earth, will follow him there. Finally, *"when the thousand years have expired,"* Satan, not having shown the slightest bit of repentance, will reach his final destination and punishment and be *"cast into the lake of fire and brimstone."* (Revelation 20:7,10)

The region known as the *"lake of fire"* may already be functioning. We know that the *Antichrist* and *False Prophet* will be sent there after their defeat in the *Battle of Armageddon*. (Revelation 19:20) Since that Battle looks like it will be coming in the near future of human history, then probably the *Lake of Fire* has already been prepared. We might conclude then that some of the very worst of this world's criminals have already been sent there.

As for the demons, like many a criminal in our earthly justice system, they seem to view the prospect of future incarceration or punishment in the *Lake of Fire* as nothing more than an occupational hazard; they are not at all like the repentant thief on the cross, who said, *"We receive the due reward of our deeds"*. (Luke 23:41) From the example of the demons whom Jesus encountered in the Gergesenes' country, it is clear that the thought of repentance or rehabilitation was the furthest thing from their minds.

But who knows? Perhaps the *Lake of Fire* will be the medicine that will change their attitude; instead of seeing it as an "occupational hazard", some may see their punishment as the doorway towards rehabilitation. Whatever the case, if the demons, whose rebellion must be very deep-seated, can't humble themselves once they find themselves in the Lake of Fire, hopefully, many of the human souls who have landed there will come to their senses, repent, and find restoration.

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Appendix: *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (on Rev 14:10-11), compiled 1976-1992

Let us observe that, whatever the angel may mean, he certainly does not speak of never-ending existence in never-ending torment, for the words of the original unhappily translated both in the Authorized and Revised Versions "forever and ever" ought properly to be rendered "unto ages of ages;"* and, distinguished as they are on this occasion alone in the Apocalypse from the first of these expressions by the absence of the Greek articles, they ought not to be translated in the same way. (*They are so rendered in the margin of the Revised Version)

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Continue to C-5: Deliverance from the Lake of Fire? Society of the Future!