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C-6: The Lake of Fire - What Is It For?

Most Bible translations express the fate of those who enter the Lake of Fire in rather forbidding terms: “*shall be tormented with fire and brimstone... and the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever... they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.*” (14:10-11, 20:10) Admittedly, these are not easy words to digest. There is a certain amount of symbolism in these passages, however, so it will help to examine them and try to understand what they are really saying.

First of all, this nasty word “*torment*”. It comes from the Greek *basanos*: a touchstone (also called basanite or Lydian stone); it was used to test the purity of gold and silver metals by the kind of streak the metal would leave when it scratched the stone. Because the stone was used for testing purposes, the word for it came to be applied to the practice of torture or the experience of torment. But the fact that the original word had to do with testing for purity suggests that the “*torment*” in the Lake of Fire has a certain useful, even benign, purpose.

In addition to the touchstone method, if a goldsmith was unsure of a metal’s purity, then he would resort to using fire to burn out the dross from the metal. Elsewhere in the Scriptures, the word “*fire*” is associated with the idea of purification. “*The fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is... If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*” (1Corinthians 3:13-15)

The purpose of the fire is not punishment only (although it might seem like it to the person being purged). Rather, it goes beyond punishment; it cleanses and gets rid of the trash from a person’s life, and so prepares

him or her for life in the Kingdom - with the end result that "*he himself will be saved.*"

Jesus told His disciples, "*Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.*" He was advising His followers that it was smarter to "*abide in the vine*", to allow God to prune, during our earthly lives, the unfruitful branches and so "*bring forth more fruit*" and "*have treasure in heaven*" than to postpone it till the Afterlife. (John 15:2,4; Matthew 19:21 - KJV)

Now the above Scriptures were directed to those who were building on the foundation of Christ. But then what about those who never came to Christ during their earthly lives and refused to "*come to the Light*", even in the Afterlife, because of their continuing waywardness and rebellion? They would end up in the "*lake of fire*".

But what is the "*fire*" for? Is it only a dead end - punishment and nothing else - to make people miserable for infinity? If that were the case, then it would be like saying God has come to His wits' end and doesn't know what to do anymore. The skeptic would be right in thinking God isn't all that He's cracked up to be.

But if God is who He is supposed to be - all-powerful and perfect in His love - then we can rest assured that He does not give up so easily on His creations; He is tireless in His endeavors to reconcile the souls of mankind to Himself. Surely then, the fires of Hell are there for a purpose, that of purification and reconciliation: to use the misery of Hell and the uncomfortable feelings of guilt over sin and destructive behavior that will guide and prod souls towards repentance and restoration.

Some other examples in the Bible where fire symbolizes this process of refining and purifying:

The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the hearts. (Proverbs 17:3)

When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and purged the blood of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and by the spirit of burning. (Isaiah 4:4)

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you

in the furnace of affliction. (Isaiah 48:10)

I will... refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, "This is My people"; and each one will say, "The LORD is my God."
(Zechariah 13:9)

But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness. (Malachi 3:2-3)

I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire.
(Revelation 3:18)

Finally, it may be helpful to note that the Greek word for "fire" is *pur*. It forms the base for the English word "pure" and "purify" and for things to do with fire ("pyre, pyro-"). It is thought that the word may share a common derivation with the ancient Sanskrit word *pu*: "to purify". Fire and purification were often associated together in ancient cultures, e.g. the Zoroastrians' worship of the fire god Ahura Mazda.

Knowing how the Bible treats fire as a symbol for purification should help us then to understand this phrase "*lake of fire*" in a different light. We can see it from a less dreadful point of view, not as punishment only, but as God's furnace where He refines the souls of those who have caused great destruction in the Earth - with the end in view of turning around even those incorrigibly rebellious ones to the Light.

The apostle Paul once said, "*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.*" (Acts 14:22) Having come to the Lord, our lives experience great joy and fulfilment. This is one side of the picture, and a beautiful and uplifting one it is. But in this life we are tested to some degree, so that by the time we reach our earthly end, we are as valuable, pure gold metal and well prepared for life in the Heavenly Realm.

And if we're not prepared, what happens then? The testing will just have to come later: perhaps some will land in "*shame and everlasting disgrace*" as "*unprofitable servants*"; others in "*Death and Hades*" as evildoers; and yet others in the "*lake of fire*", as evildoers who are enemies of God.

Impure metal results from a lack of refining. When souls are not willing to submit themselves to God's way, then they are in need of some refining. Having surrendered to the forces of Darkness and temptations to take the "selfish way" or the "easy way" or the "rebellious way", they have become corrupt and less prepared for life in the Heavenly Realm. So of course, they must undergo the "fires" of refining before they would be ready to move on towards the Kingdom, or the Kingdom's full glories and privileges.

Now besides the "fire" often mentioned in Scripture, there is the other purifying agent: "*brimstone*" (*theion* in Greek). For this substance, we find a helpful definition in *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, pg. 284:

***Theion...* apparently the neuter of the adjective *theios* [divine] i.q. [equivalent to] divine incense, because burning brimstone was regarded as having power to purify, and to ward off contagion)... *brimstone.*"**

"*Brimstone*" is, therefore, a divine agent of purification, not a messy agent of destruction as we usually think of it. The poisonous, sulphurous fumes and the burning quality of brimstone kill bacteria and infection.

Thus, from what we have learned so far, the phrase "*tormented with fire and brimstone*" is symbolic language and might be translated as "tested and tried through the agents of spiritual purification (symbolized as '*fire and brimstone*')." Of course, to the person undergoing the purging process, they may feel as if they are being "*tormented*".

We may speculate on the method of purging. Perhaps souls in the Lake of Fire will be confronted with the fruits of their sinful ways by having to see and even feel the results of the destruction and mayhem they were responsible for - a painful process, to be sure. The warmonger, for example, would see the misery and bloodshed he has caused, maybe even feel what it is like to be grievously wounded. That sounds rather drastic, but for some that is not only the shock treatment they deserve, but also the medicine they need that will spur them on to repentance and reconciliation with their Creator.

We can understand then that the reason souls are sent to the Lake of Fire extends beyond mere punishment; their sojourn there is meant to purge and purify them of the evil that their souls have become infected with. (Hence the “*fire and brimstone*” symbolism.) Certainly, this will be a painful process for them. *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”* (Hebrews 10:31) But at least there is a purpose and an end in view.

We could imagine, let us say, a character like Adolph Hitler. Most of us would agree that someone like him deserves plenty of punishment. But then we might also feel a shred of mercy and say, “Well, if he does truly repent and if he has suffered a good amount, why then maybe he could be released... on probation of course. After all, I do recall that time in my own life when I acted a little bit like Hitler myself.”

To get an idea of what the Lake of Fire is like, the following quote provides some insight. This was the result of a visionary experience of a man of God whom the Lord allowed to get a glimpse of that Nether World:

It was almost like a hospital, because it had very nice polished floors... And in each room there were different people doing different things, all very busy.

It seemed like everything everybody was doing was totally futile and useless and just a waste of time! They were all very, very busy accomplishing nothing! The scientist was conducting endless experiments that never bore any results, and they were shooting rockets and more rockets into space that either never got off the ground or that never went anywhere! The soldier was on the battlefield and bombers were zooming overhead and shells screaming and landing all around him, and he just seemed to be going through the endless hell of war just like he had been on earth.

Each one was continuing in his own little private hell of his former existence without any relief, no surcease, no hope of it ever ending, and yet absolutely all useless...

I never thought of Hell being like this! This is about the worst possible thing I can imagine! - Not just burning up with literal flames, but constantly burning with that fruitless fire of endless, useless endeavor, ceaseless struggle, pointless pain, and seemingly

endless sorrow and suffering!...

All these endlessly lighted corridors and rooms!... even out[side] there was nothing but battlefields and hellish wars and all kinds of funny mechanical noises like machinery and factories and industries and refineries and endless conveyor belts and assembly lines and that horrible acrid, burning sulfuric smell, those choking foul fumes!

Hell is the extension, multiplication, amplification, continuation, endless continuation of the same monotonous, humdrum drudgery... Useless existences, fruitless, absolutely purposeless existences - never getting anywhere, never accomplishing anything, never improving anything or making any progress or helping anybody - just totally useless, only endless, non-stop, even when you're weary you couldn't quit!... like a magnified extension of this life of hell on earth!

It was almost like there was no truth there, because you didn't know what to believe! You didn't know what was fact and what was fancy...

There was this strange extension of each life under total control in that polished Hell! All the people were prisoners or inmates...

(From lecture by [David Brandt Berg](#), transcribed August 29, 1973)

The above revelation pictures Hell, or the Lake of Fire, as a place of endless dreariness, and likely, that is how it will feel to those who must dwell there. This utter lack of hope differs from the kind of treatment given to those who are under God's care in "*shame and everlasting disgrace*", or in the realm of Hades. Regardless of where one is in the Kingdom, one will always experience hope and feel useful - a far cry from the utter futility of Hell's activity.

Those who have come to the Lord will benefit from God's presence and a loving atmosphere, even if it must be in the midst of rehabilitation. In the Lake of Fire however, going by the above revelation, an atmosphere of hopelessness pervades. Hell's weary inmates, lost and confused, see no end in sight, trapped with no way out of their misery. Instead of being freed from the negative aspects of their earthly lives, those

dark inclinations return to plague and haunt them in the Afterlife.

Yet this may be the very medicine needed at this stage - learning what it is like to dwell apart from God and outside of His Kingdom, so that eventually, they will be willing to submit and turn to Him, their Creator. We could speculate then that the Lake-of-Fire treatment is designed as a sort of in-between stage to prepare these corrupted souls to embark on the path of restoration... at least those souls who are willing to choose that path.

And when the opportunity finally comes along, like the Prodigal Son, many of them will at last be willing to swallow their pride, make better life decisions, and restore their relationship with the Almighty. Like refugees in a war-torn land, they will be desperate to escape and do whatever it takes to return to the Father's house.

If punishment was really meant to last “forever and ever” - time-without-end as most translations would suggest - then why not just annihilate those souls, bring an end to their existence? It would seem pointless to keep the punishment going on and on forever if there is no possibility for escape or rescue.

Those incorrigible souls may deserve quite a bit of suffering, but without any avenue for release? It doesn't make sense. One could imagine that for anyone stuck in Hell the time-without-end view would stifle any motivation to move forward towards the Light and righteousness. If there is no hope of release, then why bother making any effort to change or improve?

Some souls may prefer to keep on in their rebellion and torment; that's possible too, of course, but it would be their decision, not God's. The fire is there to burn away the dross of rebellion and waywardness and sin. But such purification depends also on the yieldedness of the souls who are undergoing the purging.

The very fact that God doesn't just annihilate the souls of the wicked at the time of their Second Death but sends them instead to the Lake of Fire shows that He is allowing them the option of deciding to turn in the right direction. (Revelation 20:6,14) He has hope and the desire to reconcile

even the rebels; for He is “*Lord of both the dead and the living.*” (Romans 14:9) They are His creations, after all, just as much as the righteous are who inherit eternal life, just as much as the “*meek*” are who “*shall inherit the earth*”... while they, the wicked, are having to suffer for their sins.

Up to this point, their self-righteous view of themselves as having done no wrong has gone unchallenged. But the Lake of Fire, however it works, will serve the purpose of waking them up to reality - to see and feel the damage done by their terrible crimes. All reasons for self-justification will be stripped away. To continue excusing the selfish and cruel behavior of their former lives will be nothing less than insanity - a willing blindness to reality born out of pride, the same sin that led to Satan’s downfall.

Perhaps it could be compared to what often happens in this life. Before persons are ready to receive Christ’s salvation, they often have to come to the end of their own ways and to a realization of their inadequacy, shortcomings, and wrongdoings. Otherwise, feeling sufficient in themselves, they think they don’t need God. Thus, the cleansing agents of *fire and brimstone* are useful in this regard - to assist lost souls by purging them of the contamination of self-justification.

Interestingly, one of the words used for “*Hell*” in the New Testament is *Gehenna*. This word originated from the name of a place outside Jerusalem - the city’s trash dump. Fires were burning there constantly to get rid of the garbage and to eliminate the danger of infection and spread of bacteria. And that is what “*fire and brimstone*” is for - to cleanse and purify souls that are riddled with the infections of sin.

And another feature of *Gehenna*: its trash-burning operation had to be carried on outside Jerusalem. In like manner, the Lake of Fire is located outside the Kingdom.

The idea of Hell and the Lake of Fire as a sort of last-ditch purging ground finds a parallel in the story of the Prodigal Son. (Luke 15:11-32) It was the son’s misery in a “*far country*” (like being outside the Kingdom) that brought him back to his senses and to reconciliation with his father. And as far as the father was concerned, mending the broken relationship with his son was more important to him than the damage caused by his younger son’s foolish behavior. And that is God’s desire: to mend the

broken relationship with His creation that has existed ever since the fall of man in the Garden of Eden.

Those who are “*not found written in the Book of Life*” are like the Prodigal Son; their relationship with the Father is broken; they have brought losses to the Father’s estate. While in the “*far country*”, the prodigal son did not choose to return to his father until at last he wound up in the swine pit. Likewise, those who have broken their relationship with God the Father, enter a “*far country*”. And even when invited to return to the Father (either during their earthly lives or in the Afterlife), they refuse.

So finally, they wind up in the “swine pit” - “*cast into the lake of fire.*” (Revelation 20:15) At this bottom level, these souls, at last, may be willing to turn in the right direction. And a question we could ponder: which of us, at some point or other in our lives, has not acted like a prodigal son or daughter?

Getting back to the original question of what is the Lake of Fire for, it might help to trace how Satan’s dominion has been collapsing and is being replaced by the dominion of Christ. In the Beginning it would appear that Satan held control over the lower regions of *Death and Hades* as well as dominion over the Earth. “*Him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.*” (Hebrews 2:14) “*All the kingdoms of the world... have been delivered to me [Satan]*” (Luke 4:5-6)

Since it was the serpent, the Devil, in the Garden of Eden who beguiled Adam and Eve to disobey God and thereby bring upon them the sentence of death, it seems this earned him a certain degree of authority to cause death amongst human beings and/or to have some measure of influence over the souls of disobedience in the Afterlife.

In Revelation 6 we see the “*pale horse*”, bringing death to Earth’s inhabitants. “*The name of him who sat on it was Death, and Hades followed with him.*” (6:8) The Horses in this chapter are symbolic of forces that function and rule the Earth from the spiritual realm.

The Pale Horse of “*Death*” and “*Hades*”, along with the Red and Black Horses of war and greed, dominate the world of mankind in this present

Age. However the White Horse, symbolic of Christ and His forces, has also entered the stage of human history.

After His death on the Cross, Christ infiltrated the domain of the Pale Horse. There in that Dark Kingdom, He preached to the Pale Horse's prisoners and liberated those who were receptive to Him (which may well have included the majority of them). "Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live." (John 5:25)

"For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living." (Romans 14:9) "He Himself likewise shared in the same [our flesh and blood nature], that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil." (Hebrews 2:14) "For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death." (1 Corinthians 15:25-26) The destruction of this "last enemy" - the conquest of Death, Sin, and Hell - began with Christ's glorious Resurrection from the dead.

Stage two of this conquest over death begins at the Judgment Seat of Christ, which marks the beginning of the Millennium. Satan's power over the Earth and its inhabitants will be removed during this golden Age of Peace. "And [an angel from Heaven] cast him [Satan] into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more." (Revelation 20:3)

And in the final stage, at the end of the Millennium, "death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire," and Satan also "was cast into the lake of fire." (Revelation 20:14,10) At this point Satan's influence in our domain will have come to an end.

Now regarding the Lake of Fire, we learn in Revelation 14 that those who turn against God in the End of the Age "shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb." (Revelation 14:10) This sounds grim, but it is noteworthy that Christ and the angels are present. Now why is that, we may wonder?

Perhaps the first thing that comes to mind might be something like this: "OK, you guys have gotten away with your nonsense long enough,

but here you are, surrounded by the Big Guns; the jig's up, and you're really going to get it now!" But that is not why they are there.

Gold cannot be refined unless there is a goldsmith, who watches and presides over the refining process. Likewise, souls in the Lake of Fire cannot be refined without the presence of the Goldsmith, the Lamb, and the holy angels. They will watch over the purging process for the evildoers and the enemies of God. No more escape from having to face up to and own up to their past lives of corruption.

This is called “chastening” in Hebrews 12. There is a common conception that the Devil is to blame for all of our troubles and difficulties. He certainly is to blame for many of them, true enough. The Lord may even use the Devil to afflict His wayward children as a means to get them back on track.

However, He does not have to use the Devil; He is quite capable of doing it Himself. There are many examples in the Scriptures where God Himself (or His angelic messengers) brought the plagues or the troubles or the lessons to His own people or to their enemies.

And some of what we may think of as “hell” may actually be God’s chastening (done in love, of course). And it is wise for any person under God’s care (of chastening) not to take offence but to accept it as a sign of His great love for us. “*For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.*” “*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.*” (Hebrews 12:6, Revelation 3:19)

It also helps to remember that “*the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.*” His correction, whether it happens to God’s people in this life or to the haters of God in the Lake of Fire, is “*more to be desired... than gold... sweeter also than honey... moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward.*” (Psalm 19:9-11)

It is well to keep in mind that God’s chastisement is the complete opposite of what the Devil’s torments bring. Instead of purpose, the Devil brings futility; instead of strengthening, weakening; instead of love, hatred; instead of discipline, confusion; instead of victory, defeat; instead

of profit or blessing, loss; instead of restoration, degeneration.

So, even though it can be “*a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*,” at least those “*hands of the living God*” are capable of moving a person forward into realms of greater blessing and peace. (Hebrews 10:31)

As mentioned above, Christ will preside over the Lake of Fire. Interestingly, He is referred to as the “*Lamb*”. ([Revelation 14:10](#)) We might have thought “*Lion of the tribe of Judah*” would be the more appropriate title in this situation. ([5:5](#)) But “*Lamb*” is the title given.

So, getting back to the question: why is Christ there, and the angels, presiding over the Lake of Fire? It seems that even though the Lake-of-Fire inmates are dwelling outside of God’s presence, yet they have not been totally forgotten or abandoned.

Apparently, even in the throes of severe punishment, the mercy of God is not far away. If those souls can bring themselves to “*call upon the name of the Lord*”, then He is right there to guide them onto the path of restoration. (Romans 10:13)

Most commentaries interpret Christ’s presence to mean that He is there to add to their misery by reminding them of whom they have rejected and what they are missing. This seems more of a human reaction (bordering on the petty and vindictive), not befitting the nature of God. It would seem more reasonable to suppose that He is there to see to it that Hell’s evil spirits are being kept in line, to make sure the Lake of Fire is being managed properly, and to look out for anyone there who might be on the verge of repentance.

The love of God is unfathomable. In the words of an old song,

**It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell.**

—Frederick M. Lehman (from song “The Love of God”)

This peculiar feature of God’s omnipresence, even in the depths of Hell, was expressed long ago in Psalm 139: “*If I ascend into heaven, you are*

there; if I make my bed in Hell, behold, you are there.” (139:8)

So far we have conceived of the Lake of Fire as a region where souls find out what it is like to be separated from God. And that would be hell. And yes, being His enemies, those in the Lake of Fire will be separated from God, but only because they have separated themselves through their own choice.

To those in the region of “*shame and everlasting disgrace*”, the loving presence of heavenly beings are there to comfort, instruct, and bring restoration into God’s favor. But in the Lake of Fire, that horrible feeling of separation from God’s presence would be all-pervading.

The imagery of a fiery furnace and a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth used within both of these parables [“Wheat and the Weeds” and “Dragnet”] is just that—imagery. It shouldn’t be taken literally that the afterlife for those who reject the message of the gospel will be one of flames and burning. However, whatever the exact circumstances will be, it will be a separation from God and from those who love God. When we consider all the things that God is—love, beauty, goodness, mercy, holiness, kindness, justice, righteousness, trustworthiness, and so much more—thinking of being in a place where the things that God is are not present because He is not present is harrowing. (*The Stories Jesus Told: “The Wheat and the Weeds, Matthew 13:24-43”* by Peter Amsterdam)

Yet in a sense, souls in the Lake of Fire are not abandoned totally. If they turn to Him, He will not refuse them. And although they are outcasts from the Kingdom, even here, if they turn towards the Light, they may yet find the path, leading out of Hell’s barren desolations towards regions of peace and serenity and on to the gates of the Kingdom. This would be a reasonable conclusion if, as Revelation 22:15 suggests, there are former Lake-of-Fire inmates dwelling on the New Earth.

It also seems reasonable to suppose that, if souls are being tested “*in the presence of the holy angels and... the Lamb*”, then those heavenly hosts are at least keeping an eye on them to see who might be having a change of heart and moving toward genuine repentance. The Lake of Fire

is designed for the enemies of God, no question. But the command that Jesus gave to “*love your enemies*” remains in force. (Matthew 5:44) It is a tough kind of love, no doubt, but love all the same.

God does not override human will and choice. But He does try to guide His created angels and humans to move in the direction that will bring them joy and satisfaction. By the time those souls, who have been too proud, stubborn, and God-hating, reach the Lake of Fire, that “guidance” will have run its course pretty much. By this time, whoever is so hardened and incorrigible that they still rebel against God’s authority, still cannot bring themselves to go God’s way, then they will have to go their own way to dwell in the Lake of Fire.

For those who finally do end up in hell, it will be because they fought their way there every step of the way over everything God could possibly do to keep them out of hell. They will have insisted on going to hell despite every merciful, loving opportunity God gave them to be saved and repent. (from David Brandt Berg lecture, [“Heaven, Hell, and In-Between!”](#))

The above quote makes sense when we consider what we’ve learned so far about life in the Afterlife: first of all, many worthy souls, if they did not happen to know Christ during their earthly lives, will get that opportunity after death; those who are unworthy of such divine intercession will land in *Death and Hades*, or Purgatory, or some such place; then after 1,000 years – plenty of time to re-consider their life choices – if they have decided to turn around and go in the right direction, they will be written in the Book of Life and granted citizenship on the New Earth; after all of this, whoever stubbornly continues to hate God, will get sent to the Lake of Fire.

What happens to souls when they get to this stage, we may wonder? Perhaps they are just left on their own – wandering in aimless futility and emptiness; perhaps they find themselves tormented by cruel demons; perhaps punishment is meted out that will make them endure the same kind of pain they had caused others during their previous lifetime. Whatever happens there in that infernal region, is a subject on which we can only speculate.

But if nothing else, souls imprisoned there will find out what it is like to live outside the presence of God. At this point, being stuck in the swine pit of Hell is almost the only “guidance” left that may yet shepherd them back towards the Father’s house.

And as the title of this study has suggested, there is a bit of “Heaven in Hell”. That is, there is hope for souls who are incarcerated there to be rescued if they choose to turn away from the Darkness and towards the Light. Such a view may not seem to jibe with the customary way certain Scriptures have been translated or understood.

However, after fine-tuning our understanding of key phrases like “everlasting punishment” and “forever and ever”, we have learned that they do not have to imply a time-without-end scenario, as most translations would suggest, nor punishment without purpose or an end in view. In particular, the “forever and ever” phrase simply tells us the “when” of that punishment, not the “how long” - “in/into the ages of the ages”. This leaves the “how long” aspect open-ended - dependent, we might presume, on the attitude of Hell’s prisoners themselves.

Hell and the Lake of Fire are God’s creation, a place of habitation for evil spirits - a prison to separate and prevent them from causing any trouble in the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, if Hell is God’s creation, then it is not totally separate from Him. And as the example of Christ’s visit to the “spirits in prison” would indicate, God could descend there if He wants to, or send His emissaries, to see what is going on and/or to arrange the rescue of whoever is worthy.

Related to this, we can recall the example of the three angelic messengers who were sent to Sodom and Gomorrah to rescue Lot and his family: “[God] delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;) (2Peter 2:7-8, KJV; Genesis 18-19)

Who is to say then that, like Lot of old, someone, dwelling in the Lake of Fire, could not get so “vexed” and disillusioned with its inhabitants that he or she might start to hunger for righteousness... and thereby qualify for rescue from that infernal region?

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