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

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C-7: Conclusion

As mentioned in the Introduction, this study has tried to clarify and bring forward the following main concepts:

1) A more flexible and inclusive view on who are God's people.
2) A better understanding about the Afterlife, in particular, the possibility of salvation in the Afterlife.
3) The understanding that to be *"justified by faith"* includes being *"justified by works"*.
4) The urgency and responsibility of believers to bring the Good News message and way of life into the world of mankind.
5) The realization that salvation does not automatically rule out any form of correction or chastening in the Afterlife.
6) The understanding that *Hades* and the *Lake of Fire* are there for the purposes of refining and correction and are not necessarily permanent abodes.

Whether these conclusions are right, or whether the reasoning behind them is sound, you the reader can decide. But at the very least, it is hoped that you will have gained a perspective of the Almighty as a Being who is benevolent, just, and merciful, always teaching and leading His creations into realms of greater maturity and blessing… and that His great concern extends, not just to those who know Him, but also to those who don't know Him, and even to those who are His enemies.

When we look at a mountain range from a distance, it looks like one big monolithic wall of stone. Then as we approach the mountain range, we discover plenty of foothills and different gradual stages prior to getting to the highest peaks. Likewise, when we consider the Afterlife, we, who do not dwell yet in that Celestial Realm, are apt to view it in over-simplified terms as a scene of two broad ranges, or categories: Heaven and Hell. But we should understand that there are in-between stages and much diversity in the Afterlife that the basic Heaven-Hell distinction cannot properly account for.

Very often, the thoughts and ways of God can be incomprehensible to us in the Earthly Realm. (Isaiah 55:8-9) For example, how do we reconcile the concepts of pre-destination and free will; or judgment and mercy? Theologians have debated these questions for ages, often sticking to one side of the issue rather than seeing how the issues are intertwined.

We can view pre-destination and free will as two distinct categories; yet in reality we experience both, and it seems almost impossible to tell whether it was free will of pre-destination that caused events to happen in our lives the way they did. And so it may be with the question of Heaven and Hell. We can view the Afterlife in those general terms; but in reality there probably exists a far greater myriad of situations in that Realm Beyond than we could ever imagine.

In this study, four broad categories are outlined: everlasting life, shame and everlasting disgrace, *Death and Hades*, the *Lake of Fire*. But even this probably falls far short of the reality. It should be no surprise, when we get to the Other Side, to find there a great diversity of "foothills", much more than we can imagine – many different stages of ecstasy, blessing, reward, correction, chastisement, or penalty.

Another point to keep in mind: When a soul enters a certain region, he or she won't be thinking, "Oh great, I've made it to Heaven", or "Oh no, I've landed in *Death and Hades*". More likely, they will be wondering, "Am I dead. and what do I do now?" They will be re-evaluating their lives and relationship to the One who created them; those moments will be very intense, to be sure.

In the *Earthly Realm* we experience a great deal of concern about

status and our station in life. But in the World Beyond those concerns are swept away by the overpowering love of God. The soul who arrives in Heaven will find supreme joy in being fully united with his or her Savior and Creator. The one in *Death and Hades* will feel a longing to find the One from whom he or she long ago rejected and now feels the pain of separation; or souls may turn the other way and feel bitterness against the God whom they are convinced has treated them unfairly.

One often hears the idea that once a soul is in Hell, then it's curtains for that person – no hope of escape from never-ending torment. Some people deserve and need much punishment, it is true. But to believe that there is no hope at all of release makes God into something that common sense tells us cannot be true.

God is to be feared and reverenced, of course, but, unlike some human rulers, He is not an arbitrary, merciless tyrant. The Bible declares just the opposite – that *"God is love"*. (1John 4:8) God's long-range plans call for reconciliation, not exclusion.

True, the souls of evildoers must at some point be separated from the righteous in the Day of Judgment. But God, in His love, is always reaching out, always searching for even the faintest glimmer of repentance from those who have been cast aside.

And we can be sure that the punishment He does have to dispense is tailor-made for each individual according to what they have done to deserve it and what will lead them towards repentance. This concept of personalized attention is implied in the passage, *"And they were judged, <u>each one</u> according to his works."* (Revelation 20:13)

So where did this idea of never-ending Hell-fire and damnation come from? As we have learned, the reason is rather trivial – nothing but a mistranslation of certain words in the Bible. But also, not so trivial, for it has a lot to do with the fact that religious leaders sometimes exploit the fear of "eternal hellfire" as a way of exerting more control over their congregations.

In the Middle Ages before the Reformation, sadly, the practice was rampant where church leaders played on these fears in order to extort

money from the people they were supposed to be caring for. And this sort of mindset among church rulers had a lot to do with how the Bible was translated then and continues to create misconception in our minds even today about God's true nature.

Whatever the origins of the merciless-tyrant view of God were, when we understand the true meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words, then we can better evaluate some of these difficult phrases like *"shame and everlasting disgrace"* or *"everlasting punishment"* or *"tormented forever and ever".*

We are liberated from the nagging concern of having to imagine a time-without-end Hell or punishment for those who are not "saved". The usual English translations convey a bleak hopelessness about "eternity": the idea that whoever's not saved, or whoever winds up in the *"lake of fire"*, is destined to remain there with no hope of release.

For those who find themselves in that situation, they may feel pretty hopeless and like there's no end in sight to their punishment. But the reality is, it would not be consistent with the nature and character of God to disallow any possibility for redemption in the Afterlife. He is *"not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."* (2 Peter 3:9)

Certainly, there are many who deserve and need what Hell has to offer. But surely, God's preferred goal is to use the punishment to bring souls to repentance.

Our own prison systems have this goal in mind – to help criminals come to their senses and stop committing crimes, and eventually, to grant release once they are ready to become law-abiding citizens. Our judicial and prison systems are notoriously unfair and incompetent, yet they still manage to rehabilitate many of society's wayward citizens.

Imperfect as our justice systems are, nevertheless, they do work with some degree of success. Rehabilitation, probation, restoration into society are their professed methods and goals. The system works in an imperfect way, but at least it is there, and there is recognition that criminals can become law-abiding citizens, and allowance is made for that.

Surely God's "correctional system" (whether in *"shame and everlasting disgrace", "Death and Hades"*, or the *"Lake of Fire"*) is capable of doing the same, and doing it much better, with perfect justice, fairness, and mercy. And if so, then souls should be getting rehabilitated and released from their incarceration in the spiritual realm, not just left to suffer in some kind of hopeless infinity of never-ending punishment.

This concept of reconciliation for God's created souls during the Afterlife is known as the doctrine of Universal Reconciliation. It includes the belief that Christ will manifest Himself to many worthy souls as they enter the Spirit Realm at the time of death. Although they never had a genuine opportunity to receive Him during their earthly lives, they obeyed their conscience and made wise and loving choices during their lifetimes. And so they pass from Death into Life and are spared from the *Second Death*.

The Christian playbook tends to make a big division between those who are *"born again"* and those who are not. Nevertheless, many in this latter group are following their conscience: *"who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness."* (Romans 2:15) They are following *"the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."* (John 1:9)

In God's view, whether or not a person has accepted Christ, is not the only way He separates the "sheep" from the "goats" (the good guys from the bad guys). As we know from the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46), God's judgment as to what fate should be applied to the souls of humankind is based on how a person treated the needy and destitute, their deeds of kindness and mercy and justice.

The sheep would, of course, include those who've genuinely accepted Christ (which can't happen without a turn to righteousness); and God knows those who are His. We who are *"born again"* have a special advantage– a closer connection to the Spirit, power, and life of God; a more complete understanding; plus the comforting assurance of salvation and the certainty of knowing that we have *"passed from death into life"*. (John 3:7, 5:24)

But we shouldn't let that knowledge cloud our realization that the

playing field may be more level than we think. It may be that many of those who have not yet come to Christ and may never come to Christ in this life, could very well be shown the same divine favor as we who have come to Christ in this life. And we should recall certain Scriptures: *"you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him… and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."* (1John 2:29, 4:7-8)

Just as Jewish people in the days of the Early Church thought that they had a special edge over non-Jewish Christians – and in some ways they did because of their religious training and knowledge of the law – nevertheless, this did not grant them any special favor in the eyes of God. In the same way, born-again Christians can sometimes over-emphasize their advanced status as the sons and heirs of God and forget that God may look through that lens a little differently.

Christ's Parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25 suggests strongly that there are a huge number of people destined for Heaven, who are not necessarily Christians. (And some Christians will find themselves in shame and disgrace, having landed uncomfortably close to that border separating them from those who are destined for Hell.) *"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."* (Matthew 19:30)

And even though the goats are destined for Hell, it doesn't mean they can't change their destiny. In the Spirit Realm they have opportunity (a whole 1,000 years) to turn around, to turn to the Light, to get their names written in the *Book of Life* before that day of Final Judgment.

Although we understand that many who don't know Christ during their earthly lifetimes will come to Him in the Afterlife and enter the Kingdom, this does not mean to say that we can belittle the need for evangelism.

For there exists a great advantage to those who accept Christ during their earthly lifetimes – release from the torments of meaninglessness, emptiness, hopelessness. Millions will testify to the wonderful joy of salvation they received when, in some way or another, they heard about and had the opportunity to receive the Saviour into their lives.

Universal Reconciliation has been a controversial doctrine in mainstream Christianity. The reasons for its unpopularity are probably

similar to how Jews in the Early Church days reacted; they found it hard to swallow the doctrine of acceptance of Gentiles into God's favor.

The new move of God's Spirit in those days undermined their self-righteous religious pride, the privileged status they thought they had, and put them on the same level as those Gentiles whom they had always despised and felt superior to. It meant that they were obliged to reach out and accept them into their ranks as fellow members in the family of God, and as fellow laborers in the cause of God.

To know Christ as a born-again son or daughter of God is a great honor, privilege, and blessing. But we can make ourselves unworthy of such status if we entertain a smug, self-righteous attitude that projects a lack of understanding and empathy towards those who have not yet entered into that charmed circle.

And whether or not people are officially "saved" in this life, the same rule applies to all, according to the Scripture oft-quoted in this study:

> ***"God… 'will render to each one according to his deeds': eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness–indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil… but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good…"*** **(Romans 2:5-10)**

Emphasis in that passage is on works, not belief system. Paul was addressing certain teachers who thought that their Jewish background and superior understanding gave them special status and favor from God; but he makes it clear that Jews and Gentiles all share the same playing field. ***"For there is no partiality with God."*** **(Romans 2:11)**

Besides the issue of greater inclusiveness, another aspect about Universal Reconciliation that is difficult for many to swallow has to do with God's justice. On the one hand, we like to hope that universal, or almost universal, salvation is true because it goes along well with God's love for His human creations. It jibes well with what we know and have experienced of the love, the grace, and the mercy of God.

On the other hand, when we look at those attributes of the Almighty, pertaining to righteousness, holiness, justice, etc., then it's a little more difficult to reconcile how God would forgive some who so defiantly go against His wishes – people like serial killers, Hitler, mass murderers, etc., and in fact the Devil himself. So, it is understandable that many Christian thinkers find it difficult to fully accept the doctrine of Universal Reconciliation.

At any rate, regardless of where one stands on the idea of reconciliation for extreme evildoers, the central theme or intent of this study has been to promote a broadened perspective about life in the Afterlife – not just for evildoers and the unsaved innocents, but also for those who have come to Christ during their earthly lifetimes.

Especially relevant along this line are the words of the angel Gabriel in Daniel 12:2 about God's people – that they *"shall awake, some to everlasting life"* and *"some to shame and everlasting disgrace"*. From this and other Scriptures, we realize that, within the general category of those who have *"passed from death into life"*, there are many levels of reward, or lack of reward. (John 5:24) Those whose lives were a credit to God's glory will be rewarded, and those whose lives were a discredit will have to bear the shame of their misspent lives.

In our present world we have reformatories and rehabilitation centers for wayward youth and citizens – which provide a sort of analogy to illustrate what *"shame and everlasting disgrace"* could resemble. And this, by the way, is what was meant by the "Hell in Heaven?" phrase in the title of this study. It's not really Hell, but it will be a time of training and purging to prepare wayward Christians for entering more fully into the Heavenly Realm.

And as they come to terms with their past errors and wrong attitudes and learn what the heavenly existence is all about, eventually, they will find the path to restoration and rehabilitation. *"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"* (Revelation 21:4) And all will be happy to have found their place in the Kingdom of God.

So that is the outlook for wayward Christians. (And who knows, we all may have to account for some unconfessed "waywardness" from our

former lives.) As for wayward unbelievers, presumably, they will be sentenced, for whatever time is necessary, to the realm of *Death and Hades* or into the *Lake of Fire*. But even in those depths, as this study has tried to point out, there is possibility for rescue if and when they can ever bring themselves to turn away from the Darkness towards the Light. And that is what was meant by this study's title phrase "Heaven in Hell?"

When the Bible touches on the subject of "judgment", it is easy to jump to fearful and wrong conclusions. Judgment happens, not because God is being cruel; He is actually trying to help His creations along on the path to blessedness.

And furthermore, knowing that there is judgment to come gives meaning and purpose to our present lives. Without such knowledge life becomes barren and shallow. "Eat, drink, and be merry" is the only rule worth following then because after this life, nothing. That is a lie, of course.

But when we understand that judgment is inevitable, then we are motivated to aim for higher goals and purposes; this brings the added benefit of greater fulfillment in life, and greater happiness as a result.

And when the Day of Judgment does arrive, the righteous will be freed at last from the burden of having to contend with evildoers. And they will see the reward of having lived their earthly lives justly and responsibly with a concern for the needs of others.

For the evildoers, of course, their future will be unpleasant, but their "judgment" will also be a blessing (in disguise). For it will serve to purge them of their wrong attitudes and habits. Through God's refining fires (and their yieldedness and repentance), they too can be reconciled and brought into God's favor and a state of blessedness.

For this has been God's desire throughout the ages – to mend the broken relationship with the human race that began all the way back in the Garden of Eden.

We cannot presume to fully understand the mind of God. Should we not be open then to the possibility that God's long-range plan and desire for

His creations – and it may take a long long time – is nothing less than to reconcile every human soul, even every fallen angel, to Himself?

~ THE END ~