

# Four Reasons the Early Church Did Not Believe “Hell” Lasts Forever

JULY 30, 2019 BY [RICHARD MURRAY](#)

Note from Dr. Newton

***The subject of the eternal afterlife is now being revisited and many traditional beliefs are being challenged. This article is only part of your personal studies that you might use to form your conclusion. My advice; don't jump at the first thing you hear because it is different. This needs time. Don't begin to teach anything until you have the firm conviction from Scripture and the confirming voice of the Spirit.***

Today, many people disagree on how guilty criminals should be treated. Is the purpose of punishment, the argument goes, to rehabilitate the criminal by reforming his character? Or, rather, is the purpose of punishment to inflict eye-for-an-eye retaliation on the wrongdoer? Put another way, is our motive for punishment revenge or rescue?

This same analysis can be applied to God's purpose for Hell. Is God's motive in allowing sinners to go to Hell a form of “revenge” upon the sinner, or is God's motive rather to ultimately “rescue” the sinner from his own fallen nature? Which purpose better aligns with the nature of God revealed in Jesus Christ?

Well, the majority of the early Church believed that Hell was place where God would rescue, reform and reconcile all lost sinners back unto Himself. The process of Hell was intense, thorough, critical, painful, agonizing and anguishing. But, it was ultimately restorative as each and every sinner was led through and past their own Hellish valley of sin and death, and into a deep and heartfelt place of Godly repentance.

The early Church had a significantly different view of Hell than much of the Church does today. Hell's purpose, for the majority of the Church fathers, was seen as purifying rather than punishing, restoring rather than torturing, healing rather than destroying. They believed Hell was “God's crisis-management for lost souls.” Hell was for all those who did not authentically receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior during their earthly lives.

The early Church believed God's Hell-fire was not inflicted to destroy the lost, but rather to ultimately save them. God's “fire” was WISE in that it revealed, cleansed and cured the lost soul of all the false identities accumulated during

their fallen lifetimes. The “wood, hay and stubble” of these false identities would be “burned off” of the lost soul, but they themselves would “be saved, yet so as by fire.” 1 Corinthians 3:13-15.

Hell, from this viewpoint then, was a rocky but redemptive journey to repentance and restoration. Hell was still seen as infinitely intense and unimaginably painful – – just not eternal.

Ebenezer Scrooge’s nightmarish journey as described in the classic “Christmas Carol” would be an illustration of what such a redemptive journey through Hell might look like. For Scrooge, his journey was intensely revealing, painful and heart-breaking, but ultimately redemptive. Scrooge was not even aware that his own repentance and redemption was the Lord’s endgame. He was too busy suffering at the realization of his past, present and future sins. And, in fact, Scrooge’s journey appeared to be outside of time as we know it. His whole pitiful life was played out before him in just a few earthly hours, yet for him it appeared to last a very long time.

Would God not have the same type of cosmic “elbow room” to take our souls on such a “Scrooge-like” post-mortem journey to repentance? Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, certainly allowed for this possibility: “God forbid that I should limit the time of acquiring faith to the present life. In the depth of the Divine mercy there may be opportunity to win it in the future.” Martin Luther’s letter to Hanseu Von Rechenberg, 1522.

Here is a quick historical survey of the EARLY CHURCH regarding their beliefs about HELL:

THE FIRST 500 YEARS: In the first five centuries there were six known theological schools. Four of them taught that all men would EVENTUALLY be rescued from Hell: these being the theological schools at Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea and Edessa/Nisbis. One school, Ephesus, taught Annihilationism (that sinners are totally incinerated into nothingness in Hell). Only one theological school, Rome/Carthage taught eternal punishment. Source: The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Universalism entry, p. 96, Baker Book House.

“The main Patristic supporters of the apokatastasis theory, such as Bardaisan, Clement, Origen, Didymus, St. Anthony, St. Pamphilus Martyr, Methodius, St. Macrina, St. Gregory of Nyssa (and probably the two other Cappadocians), St. Evagrius Ponticus, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, St. John of Jerusalem, Rufinus, St. Jerome and St. Augustine (at least initially [However, even after abandoning the doctrine of apokatastasis himself, Augustine very interestingly recognised that a great deal of Christians

in his day did embrace it, 'indeed the vast majority' (immo quam plurimi). These very numerous Christians, 'albeit not denying the Holy Scripture, do not believe in eternal torments' (Ench. ad Laur. 29) page 683]), Cassian, St. Isaac of Nineveh, St. John of Dalyatha, Ps. Dionysius the Areopagite, probably St. Maximus the Confessor, up to John the Scot Eriugena,<sup>28</sup> and many others, grounded their Christian doctrine of apokatastasis first of all in the Bible." Page 11, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, by Ilaria L.E. Ramelli (2013). Ramelli's work is comprehensive (800 pages) on this and her credentials beyond reproach. I daresay it's the most comprehensive and scholarly book on the subject ever written. She is working on a shorter user friendly version soon to be published.

**1ST CENTURY: PAUL.** It is interesting to note that Paul never used the word Hell in any of his writings, though he was considered the theologian of the New Testament. He spoke of God's post-mortem purging fire in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, but never of Hell per se. The Gospel of John, the disciple perhaps closest to Jesus' heart, never used the word Hell in his Gospel. It is also interesting to note that the Book of Acts never mentions the word Hell, except to speak of Jesus' liberation FROM it. Acts NEVER uses the word Hell to describe any part of the Christian message which established the Church. The following passages suggest Paul's seminal thinking on the eventual and ultimate salvation of all men: Romans 5:17,18; 10:9-17; 11:25-33; 14:11; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 15:22-28; 1 Tim. 2:1-6; 4:10; Eph. 1:10; 4:1-10; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1:20, 23; Heb. 2:9.

**2ND CENTURY: CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA.** Clement was the first to speak of God's fire as a "wise fire" which purges the sinner unto salvation. "God's punishments are saving and disciplinary (in Hades) leading to conversions, and choosing rather the repentance than the death of the sinner, and especially since souls, although darkened by passions, when released from their bodies, are able to perceive more clearly because of their being no longer obstructed by the paltry flesh. We can set no limits to the agency of the Redeemer to redeem, to rescue, to discipline, in His work, and so will he continue to operate after this life." Clem. str. 5:14.90.4-91.2; see also 5.1.9.4; and hyp. (frg. In Stahlin, *Clemens Alexandrians*, 3:211).

**3RD CENTURY: ORIGEN:** "When the Son is said to be subject to the Father, the perfect restoration of the whole creation is signified, so also, when enemies are said to be subjected to the Son of God, the salvation of the conquered and the restoration of the lost is in that understood to consist." Origen, *De Principiis*, Book III, Chapter 5, Section 7, Anf, Vol. 4. Origen was the first Christian Systematic Theologian. A fundamental and essential element of his theology was the doctrine of the universal restoration of all fallen beings to their original holiness and union with God. God's mercy and

goodness are all-inclusive and ultimately irresistible. Hellfire is corrective and purgative, not punitive and eternal. This doctrine was called Apocatastasis, “the restitution of all things” per Acts 3:21. Origen was the greatest enemy of Gnosticism (per his *Against Celsus*) and is considered the greatest theologian of the early Eastern Church. “There is hardly a major thinker who is not deeply indebted to Origen. From the middle of the Twentieth Century, focused scholarly symposia of the Greek and Latin Church have once again begun to study and critically expound the rich Origenian legacy.” *The Westminster Handbook of Patristic Theology*, WJK.

4TH CENTURY: GREGORY OF NYSSA: “What therefore is the scope of Pauls argument in this place [1 Cor. 15:28]? That the nature of evil, at length, be wholly exterminated, and divine, immortal goodness embrace within itself every rational creature; so that of all who were made by God, not one shall be excluded from his Kingdom. All the viciousness, that like a corrupt matter is mingled in things, shall be dissolved and consumed in the furnace of purgatorial fire; and every thing that had its origin from God, shall be restored to its pristine state of purity.” Tract, in *Dictum Apostoli, Tunc etiam ipse Filius subjicietur*, and c.p. 137, and seqq. Gregory was one of the three great Cappadocian Fathers who protected the doctrine of the Trinity from the Arians at the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople.

5TH CENTURY: Theodore of Mopsuestia. “They who have chosen the good, shall, in the future world, be blessed and honored. But the wicked, who have committed evil the whole period of their lives, shall be punished till they learn, that, by continuing in sin, they only continue in misery. And when, by this means, they shall have been brought to fear God, and to regard Him with good-will, they shall obtain the enjoyment of His grace.” *Assemani Biblioth. Orient. Tom. iii. Par. i. p.323*.

Church history is fairly clear that this view of Hell was not just the view of a few, but rather was the majority view of the Church.

Basil the Great (329-379) said that, “The MASS of men (Christians) say that there is to be an end of punishment to those who are punished.” *De Ascetics*. Saint Jerome (347-420) said, “I know that MOST persons understand the story of Nineveh and its king, the ultimate forgiveness of the devil and all rational creatures.” *Homily on Jonah*.

Lastly, even Augustine (354-430), who later in his life vehemently opposed Universalism, still acknowledged, “There are VERY MANY in our day, who though not denying the Holy Scriptures, do not believe in endless torments.” *Enchiridion cxii*. (The Latin for “very many” is *imo quam plurimi*, which can be translated majority).

David Bentley Hart, Eastern Orthodox theologian and Patristic scholar, notes that the early church fathers, who knew ancient koine Greek far better than do most moderns, simply didn’t translate “*aionios kolasis*” as a phrase

meaning “eternal punishment” to be applied to the duration and nature of Hell per Matthew 25:46. Hart observes that “. . . patristic theologians as diverse as Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Isaac of Nineveh saw in the phrase *aionios kolasis* (typically translated as ‘eternal punishment,’ but possible to read as ‘correction for a long period’ or ‘for an age’ or even ‘in the age to come’) no cause to conclude that hell was anything but a temporary process of spiritual purification.” *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (Loc. 2059-61) Yale University Press (February 23, 2010).

When the Church rejected this high view of God’s goodness and replaced it with a view of God as an eternal torturer, the dark ages began, almost to the day. Ever since, there has remained a small, constant and stubborn strand of those embedded in the Church who believe Hell is not an eternal torture chamber, but rather God’s final crisis-center, a cosmic ER station where God performs complicated, intense and painful surgery on human souls in order to remove all the false sin-identities accumulated over their lifetimes.

The belief that Hell is “ultimately remedial and restorative” rather than “eternally torturous” can withstand any Scriptural challenge if you accept four premises, the same four premises widely accepted by the early Church.

**PREMISE #1- JESUS DID NOT PREACH “ETERNAL PUNISHMENT” IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

“Eternal Punishment” is the term used in the English translation of the Bible on which most people base their view of eternal conscious torment in Hell. The term in the Greek is “*kolasis aionios*.” If this term does indeed mean eternal punishment, then Hell would seem to be foreverrrrrrrrr.

But, such is not the case. Let’s first consider the opinion of the great Greek scholar William Barclay, who was professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at Glasgow University and the author of many commentaries and books, including a translation of the New Testament and the very popular Daily Study Bible Series. Barclay discusses this point regarding Matthew 25:46 in his well-known autobiography:

“One of the key passages is Matthew 25:46 where it is said that the rejected go away to eternal punishment, and the righteous to eternal life. The Greek word for punishment is ‘*kolasis*,’ which was not originally an ethical word at all. It originally meant the pruning of trees to make them grow better. I think it is true to say that in all Greek secular literature ‘*kolasis*’ is never used of anything but ‘remedial punishment.’ The word for ‘eternal’ is *aionios*. It means more than everlasting, for Plato – who may have invented the word – plainly says that a thing may be everlasting and still not be *aionios*. The simplest way

to put it is that aionios cannot be used properly of anyone but God; it is the word uniquely, as Plato saw it, of God. Eternal punishment is then literally that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give.”

Aristotle supports Barclay on the meaning of “kolasis.” The only word in the Gospels for “punishment” with regard to God punishing evildoers is “kolasis,” which according to Aristotle, who knew Greek word meanings better than anybody who ever walked the planet, said that “kolasis” is the kind of punishment which “is inflicted in the interest of the sufferer,” which means it is for the betterment or improvement of the person being punished. This is contrasted with “timoria,” which Aristotle said is the kind of punishment which is “inflicted in the interest of him who inflicts it, that he may obtain satisfaction.” (Rhet. 1369b13).

In addition to Barclay’s opinion above, let’s consider some other respected sources about the proper translation of “aionios:”

The Rotterham Emphasized Bible translates “kolasis aionios” in Matthew 25:46 as “age abiding correction.”

Young’s Literal Translation translates “kolasis aionios” in Matthew 25:46 as “punishment age.”

The Concordant Literal Translation translates “kolasis aionios” in Matthew 25:46 as “chastening eonian,” or “chastening age” in other words. Our English word “eon” derives from the Greek word “aionios.” Eon, as we use the word, speaks of ages or cycles of indeterminate amounts of time. The term is often used in the plural form, such as “It’s been eons since we’ve talked,” or “Eons ago the universe was formed.” The point is that we don’t even use the term today to refer to “everlasting” in the sense of never ending. Think how silly it sounds to pluralize “everlasting” into “everlastings,” yet “eon” is pluralized into “eons” all the time.

The best translators of the New Testament Greek text would be the Greek fathers of the church over the first 500 years. They were Christian. They were scholars. They lived nearest to the time the New Testament was written and would have a better grasp of the grammatical nuances and cultural linguistics of recent generations. Koine Greek was a lost language for hundreds of years and it is somewhat presumptuous for modern scholars to think they know Biblical Greek better than did the Greek-speaking Church fathers.

The Church fathers and writers who used the term “aionios” in their writings to refer to an indefinite “age” and not to an “unending” or “everlasting” eternity are: Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hermogones, Origen, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Avitus.

“Eternity (Greek Aionios) signifies in Scripture sometimes the fact that we do not know the end, sometimes the fact that there is no end in the present

world, but there will be one in the next. Sometimes eternity means a certain length of time, even that of a human life.” (Origen, Commentary on Romans, Book 6, section 5).

The Emperor Justinian in A.D. 540 tried to extinguish Origen’s teachings by defining Catholic doctrine at that time. “The Holy Church of Christ teaches an endless aionios (ATELEUTETOS aionios) life to the righteous, and endless (ateleutetos) punishment to the wicked.” Aionios was not enough in his judgment to denote endless duration, so he employed ateleutetos. The point is that “aionios” by itself did not mean “everlasting.” It needed to be strengthened with another word to in fact mean “endless,” like “ateleutetos.” Jews who were contemporaries with Christ, but who wrote in Greek, show that “aionios” was not used to mean “everlasting.” Josephus the historian used “aionios” to refer to temples which were already destroyed (and thus not “everlasting”), indeterminate prison sentences and time lapses between historical events. He never used the word to denote “everlasting,” but rather to mean an indeterminate period or season. The Jewish writer Philo always used the words athanaton, ateleuteton or aidion to denote endless and aionion for temporary duration.

Augustine, who struggled mightily with Greek, claimed for years that the only meaning of “aionios” was “everlasting,” yet even he had to acknowledge his error when visited by the Spanish presbyter Orosius, who convinced Augustine of his error. Augustine relented, but only to the extent that “aionios” did not only mean “everlasting.” Augustine still believed it means “everlasting” with regard to Hell.

To summarize then, Greek word “Aionios,” which is sometimes translated as “everlasting” in Scripture (as in “everlasting punishment”), does NOT in fact mean “unending or everlasting in quantity of time.” Rather, “Aionios” speaks to an “indeterminate age set by God alone.” The word refers to a certain quality (not quantity) of being – – whether it be “aionios life” or “aionios remedial-punishment.” Aionios is always qualified by what it is describing. For instance, the word “great,” when applied to a merciful sentence imposed by a kind-hearted judge, might refer to a small amount of time in jail. Conversely, “great,” when applied to an atrocious crime, for which the judge “throws the book” at the defendant, might refer to a life-sentence in jail. Similarly, the nature and quality of aionios, applied to the life of God, is entirely different than when it is applied to the chastening or punishment of God. “GREAT life” in God is certainly unending, since death will have been completely defeated, but the unending length is not the primary essence of that “GREAT life.” Rather, the limitless quality of love and peace which come from being totally at one with the Lord is the key aspect of this “GREAT life.” On the other hand, “GREAT punishment” by God will not be unending since

He punishes to correct and rehabilitate and He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. 2 Pet. 3:9.

Life in God is not everlasting because it is aionios, but rather aionios is everlasting because it is referring to life in God. Conversely, aionios punishment is not temporary because aionios means temporary, but rather aionios is temporary in this context since God's chastening is curative and incapable of being eternally resisted. "For his anger is but for a moment; His favor is for a life-time: Weeping may tarry for the night, But joy 'cometh' in the morning." Psalm 30:5.

Aionios then, by itself, means an "indeterminate age," not an "unending age." Only the context of the passage provides guidance as to the actual quality and duration of the age.

**PREMISE #2- HELL AND HEAVEN ARE "OUTSIDE OF TIME" AS WE DEFINE IT**

Time to God is not the same thing as time to man. "Kairos" is the Greek term generally used to describe God's perfect timing. It is not run by a clock, but by the heart of God. "Chronos," by contrast, is the Greek term used to describe man's fallen timing. Kairos is measured by love and meaning. Chronos is measured by clocks and calendars.

Kairos is measured by relational events, renewed thoughts, repentant hearts and acts of love. Chronos, by contrast, is man's time measured apart from God. Chronos is linear clock time which is running down this fallen world like a time bomb waiting to explode.

Chronos is the sand of our lives slowly but surely emptying out our life force. Chronos is the process of dying. Chronos doesn't caress, doesn't change and doesn't forgive. Chronos ages us, disappoints us, crushes us and ultimately kills our bodies. Kairos, by contrast, cures us, restores our youth and allows us to be fully present in "the now" with our God.

The problem arises when men apply Chronos concepts to Kairos events. To label Heaven or Hell as "endless" means that it is being measured by man's time, which can't begin to grasp the Kairos reality involved.

Heaven is not Heaven because clocks will be ticking and ticking for all eternity without interruption. This Chronos concept that we will be sitting around stroking our harps forever and ever is not eternal life in the Kairos sense.

Eternal life in the Kairos sense means life of infinite quality and blessedness. It is life which has evicted death altogether. Chronos doesn't even exist anymore where Kairos life exists. This life doesn't extend time, it transcends it altogether.

So too, with Hell, it is not a Chronos reality but a Kairos event which will be determined by God alone. That God doesn't view time from Chronos'



viewpoint is established by 2 Peter 3:8 which states, “But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” In fact, Revelation 10:6-7 says that when the seventh angel declares that “the mystery of God should be finished,” that there should be time (literally Chronos) no longer!

Isn't it clear that both Heaven and Hell exist outside of time and space as we know it? Eternity is just a term to describe the limitless life of God which operates apart from the constraints of time and space.

To use four dimensional terms (length, width, height and time) to describe 100 dimensional realities is completely inadequate. A Christian writer and theologian, Edwin A. Abbott, once wrote a book called “Flatland.” It is a science fiction novel about a planet called Flatland where the inhabitants have only two dimensions – length and width. Since they lack height, they all appear as lines to each other. Some have more sides than others, but all still appear as simple lines.

One day, a three dimensional being enters their world. He tries to explain three dimensional reality but the flatlanders can't understand it because all they know is two dimensions. Ultimately, the three dimensional messiah lifts one of the Flatlanders up and out of his two dimensional reality. The flatlander now is astounded with the Heavenly reality of height that has always existed both above and beneath him. The two dimensions the flatlander did know have now been blended with the Heavenly truth of height which now gives everything he knows limitless depth and beauty.

In this same way, we who live by Chronos can't grasp the eternal essences of Heaven and Hell until our Messiah lifts us up to spiritual realities which transcend the time and space limitations of our flatland. Do we really believe that when Jesus descended into Hell to lead captivity captive and disarm all the demonic principalities and powers (Eph. 4:8-10; Col. 2:15), that this was done in linear Chronos time?

No, Jesus died once for all. What He did was outside of time and space. He died for ALL men— past, present and future. He preached (literally, evangelized) to all the dead in Hell – past, present and future (1 Pet. 4:6). If Jesus had done all this in Chronos time, we could assume only that He paid for the sins of those who were in Hell as of 33 A.D. Since we know this can't be the case, we must toss Chronos considerations out of our definitions of Heaven and Hell.

As A.W. Tozer said in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*: “Because God lives in an everlasting now, He has no past and no future. When time-words occur in the Scriptures they refer to our time, not to His. When the four living creatures before the throne cry day and night, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come, they are identifying God with the flow of creature-life with its familiar three tenses; and this is right and good,

for God has sovereignly willed so to identify Himself. But since God is uncreated, He is not Himself affected by that succession of consecutive changes we call time.”

The work of Jesus by and through the Cross began in man’s time (Chronos), but ended in God’s time (Kairos). Jesus died once for all men for all times for all sins. Heaven and Hell are realms OUTSIDE of this present Chronos time. When Jesus led captivity captive, He simultaneously rescued all men from every past Hell, every present Hell, and every future Hell. We must not apply terms of fallen time to describe God’s limitless time. Chronos terms of “quantity” of time, like unending or everlasting, simply do not properly define Kairos events like “aionios punishment” or “aionios life,” both of which speak to “quality of time” rather than “quantity of time.”

### PREMISE #3- GOD’S FLAMES OF JUDGMENT SEEK TO HEAL US, NOT TORTURE US

Like the fig leaves Adam and Eve wore to hide their nakedness from God, men wear sin-masks to keep their “real” naked selves covered and hidden from God. The ugly truth is that there is something rotten in our soul at a subconscious level that wants to ignore and avoid God.

Satan helps us here by providing demonically empowered masks to blind and deform our hearts and minds. Like the disturbed teenager who self-mutilates by knife cuts into the flesh, we self-mutilate our soul created in the image of God by disfiguring it. We do this by donning demonic masks lined on the inside with razorblades of fear, doubt and lust. God wants these sin-masks removed once and for all.

So, what becomes of our sin-masks, either in this life or the next? How are these masks dealt with, both in the short term and long term? Is there a way that in this lifetime we can rip all our masks off? Sure, this is what the Scriptures call sanctification.

Through the renewing of our minds by the Holy Spirit, we are able to progressively shed all our false selves, prideful pretenses and forged identities. Those who persist in achieving this authenticity in the Lord receive rewards in this life and the next.

But, what about those masks we never successfully cast away during this lifetime? What happens to our blindspots, the masks we never recognize and remove? What about the areas of hypocrisy that we never allow to be fully evicted? What happens in the hereafter to our masks? Are we, along with our masks, cast into the Lake of Fire to die the second death?

Or is there another solution? Can God in future ages somehow perform critical and extensive spiritual surgery on our souls? Can He burn off, cut out and cast away all our sin-masks which, all too often, have rendered us lying latches, fearful followers, and doubting disciples?

When we are judged after we die, is it all or nothing? If in any area of our lives, we have never dealt with a particular mask, does that doom our entire spirit, soul and body to eternal fire? What if we sanctified our souls to be “mask-less” at home, but still wore masks at work, or church, or with certain friends, or on certain occasions? Is this the way an all-powerful God deals with His children? Or is there a better way? A more divine way? A more loving way?

Do any Scriptures point to these sin-masks being removed by God’s judgment WITHOUT the necessity of casting the entire person into the eternal flames as well? Oh yes! 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 is quite clear:

“According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; EVERY MAN’S WORK shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be REVEALED BY FIRE; and THE FIRE SHALL TRY EVERY MAN’S WORK, of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. IF ANY MAN’S WORK SHALL BE BURNED, HE SHALL SUFFER LOSS, BUT HE HIMSELF SHALL BE SAVED; YET SO AS BY FIRE.”

This passage above refers to the judgment of “Every man’s work” (verse 13). The Revelation passage about the Lake of Fire in chapters 20-21 ALSO refers to the judgment of every man’s works: “the dead were judged... according to their works” (Revelation 20:12). So, Paul and John were both describing the same event, the judgment of every man’s works, but from their slightly different perspectives. Now, note what Paul says ultimately happens on the other side of every man’s work being judged: “If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. IF ANY MAN’S WORK SHALL BE BURNED, HE SHALL SUFFER LOSS: BUT HE HIMSELF SHALL BE SAVED; YET SO AS BY FIRE.”

So, what exactly do we know about the Lake of Fire? I have heard theologians of all ilks agree to never build a firm dogma on just one passage in Scripture, particularly if that passage is in the smack dab middle of Jewish apocalyptic section of the Bible like the book of Revelation. The reason is that this form of literature, unlike the epistles and the Gospel, are full of heavily symbolic language and feverish activity. They are more poetic and visionary than they are doctrinal. There is only extended passage that ever even talks about the Lake of Fire, and that is in Revelation 19-21.

All we know about it is:

- the devil is cast into along with the beast and the false prophet(19:20)
- those that worship the image of the beast(19:20)

- that the devil (a false identity of Lucifer?) is tormented forever (20:10)
- death and an emptied Hell are cast into it (20:14)
- and whosever's not found written in the book of life is cast into it(20:15)
- and the fearful, unbelieving, etc. shall have their PART in it(20:8)

Curiously, no particular individual is named as being cast into it. Symbolic figures are cast into it, beasts and false prophets and the devil. Nobody by proper name is mentioned. Not Herod, not Pharaoh, not Hitler, not Nero. Some "part" of our sinful being is cast into it, but does other Scripture help us better understand what that is exactly? I say yes. Scripture helps interpret Scripture.

The reasons I believe 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 and Revelation 20:12-15 are referring to the same event is because of several factors.

- both are referring to a postmortem experience
- both refer to themselves as "the judgment of men's works"
- both explicitly refer to "every man" man being so judged
- both use the imagery of "fire"
- both refer to some sort of dividing which includes "suffering and loss"

The man himself shall be saved, yet he shall SUFFER LOSS, YET SO AS BY FIRE. But, WHAT EXACTLY is it that is "BURNED" off and in the process causes the man to "SUFFER" and experience "LOSS?" The answer is clear: THE MASKS ARE BURNED OFF AND AWAY FROM US! In this context, the "wood, hay and stubble" of 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 represents the various types of false masks we have co-created with Satan and worn as the primary motivating forces behind our actions and works. Instead of performing "righteous works" that will endure, works of "gold, silver, and precious stones" (v. 12), works done under the Holy Spirit's leading and anointing (Romans 8:14), we have masked the real motives for our works with that which is from below and not above— motives which are false, demonic, and self-centered.

Each and every wood-mask, hay-mask and stubble-mask a man has wrongly allowed to be grafted onto his soul will have to be burned. The result is that he will experience the "wrenching and painful loss" of having huge parts of who he "thought" he really was over the course of his entire life completely burned away with white hot fire.

Like the most intense form of chemotherapy we know in the physical, yet multiplied a thousand times in painful intensity in the spiritual, every mask will be irradiated and destroyed with the fire of God. The man suffers a searing "identity crisis" which, though in the long term will bring great positive transformation, is in the short term painful beyond words. The length of time for the burning process may vary. "Wood" takes longer to burn than "hay" or "stubble," so wood-masks are the most dangerous.

These false identities caused the man during his time on earth to operate outside his authentic self, and instead assume the sin-identity of a lust-mask, or a pride-mask, or a legalism-mask. The man may have grafted on a “religious” mask and thereafter thought he was serving God, and that all his good works were in the service of the Lord, when in truth he was only serving his own self-righteousness (Matthew 7:22-23). Or, the man may have been serving his own fleshly desires while wearing a mask of “carnality.” Finally, the man could just be wearing “the pride of life” mask which prevented him from humbly submitting to the Lordship of the Spirit by operating in self-will.

Regardless, these masks “warp” the core motive of every man and cause them to be someone they are not, someone they were never created or called to be by God. To the extent these masks corrupt the purity of our identities in Christ, they MUST go.

So, how are they removed? In this lifetime, by sanctification, repentance and the self-judgment that comes through prayer and communion. Paul said that if we judge ourselves NOW by removing every inner sin-mask, we will not be judged later. But, IF these sin-masks are still grafted onto our souls at the time of death, which means we never dealt with them fully during our lifetime, then the Lord deals with them at the judgment of every man’s works, “yet so as by fire.”

The Lord uses, what the church Fathers Clement and Origen called God’s “WISE FIRE” to burn off and away all the false masks we have lived out of, the Satanic strongholds which have blinded, twisted and deformed us. The masks are the result of the MISUSE of our freedom combined with the Devil’s temptations and lies.

Seen from this angle, judgment is a good thing, not a fearful thing. The Greek word for “judge” means “to separate or put asunder.” God “separates” our true self from all our false selves. He “tears asunder” the masks from our true identity. And then what becomes of all our masked identities? THEY ARE CAST INTO THE LAKE OF FIRE, NEVER AGAIN TO BE PUT ON BY US OR ANYBODY ELSE!

These hollowed our identities are the superficial masks and plasticized personas which we have allowed to be grafted and suction-cupped onto our souls.

John or Jane Doe the “fearful” mask

John or Jane Doe the “unbelieving” mask

John or Jane Doe the “abominable” mask

John or Jane Doe the “murderers” mask

John or Jane Doe the “whoremonger” mask John or Jane Doe the “drug user” mask

John or Jane Doe the “idolaters” mask

John or Jane Doe the “liars” mas

“all [the above] shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” Revelation 21:8.

These false identities are soulless creations which lack any real ontology.

They are poorly constructed mannequin heads which remain devoid of any depth of being. But they are NOT us, the real us, the core us, the essential us, the authentic us, the “us” Christ created us to be

These masks become the husks or “bushels” which cover, instruct, or shade, to various degrees, our inner light with which we came into the world (Matthew 5:15-16). As John the beloved made clear, Christ is “the true Light, which lights EVERY human who comes into the world.” John 1:9.

This “mask removals” are better performed by our devotional “transformation by the daily renewing of the mind to the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God.” Romans 12:2.

But, to the extent we don’t yield to this renewing during THIS life, God will perform psychic postmortem surgery as described in 1 Corinthians 3:15.

Wood, hay, and stubble masks will be removed and cast into the fire, and “the person will suffer loss, but they ‘themselves’ will be saved, yet as by fire.”

Think here of God taking each soul on a cosmic Scrooge-like “walkabout” journey of redemption by taking them back to and through all their earlier mistakes, anguishes, pains and simultaneously showing them the better way, what they might have been, and what they could still be. Then the cathartic tears will flow and repentance will be found.

God has a name for each one of us that only HE knows. This name is who we are called to be, who we WILL be for all eternity. These false selves CAN be burned off in THIS lifetime IF I submit myself fully to the Lord’s sanctifying Spirit. But if my heart falls short, God is greater than my heart. He WILL see me delivered in the ages to come.

The great sculptor Michelangelo famously said, “The statue lies within the stone.” He believed that all the sculptor does is chip away the exterior stone to reveal the interior truth. Or, put another way, the artist removes the masked false in order to reveal the naked real. For us, we have the chance to use this life to chip away all our false masks with our Spirit-led chisel of faith. But to the extent we fail in this lifetime, God will use the righteous chisel Himself in the ages to come to perfect and reconcile all things to Himself. As the greatest artist of all, He will chip away the masked false to reveal the naked real.

It seems that God is all about name changes, or what I like to call mask-removal through name-renewal. On the positive side, the ugly mask known as Saul was burned off to reveal a mask-less Paul created in righteousness and true holiness. Likewise, in Genesis 17:5, Abram was de-masked to reveal Abraham, the father of many nations.

Revelation 2:17 tells us that God has given to each man who overcomes all worldly and demonic masks a white stone with a name on it only the Lord knows. This name is our mask-less self which ONLY the Lord can reveal to us. On the flip-side, the angel Lucifer became the masked Satan. Satan as a “mask,” certainly the deadliest and densest mask of all, will definitely be cast forever into the Lake of Fire. But, whether God will, at the end of all the ages, restore Lucifer back to his original God-created identity by wrenching away his devil mask is an open and intriguing question. Toward Satan, I have nothing but righteous hate and violent opposition on every level. But, towards the angel Lucifer who fell so very far, I must confess a stirring of pity.

Being a father of seven, I have often thought that if I were an all-powerful Father, I don't think I would ever give my children enough freedom to destroy themselves, not forever and ever and eeeeevvvvvvveeeeeerrrrrr.

I would certainly give them enough freedom to learn real gain and loss, the nature of love and cost of evil, and the nature of faith and doubt. But, I would never give them the keys to a car which could destroy them eternally.

I would give them a lot of elbow room to learn and grow, but I would not create an environment where they could destroy themselves for all time. And I don't think God does either. He might allow these masks of rebellion to deform us for a season, but it is hard to conceive He would allow the masks to stay attached to us for an eternity in the Lake of Fire. On the contrary, I see Him using the Lake of Fire as the place where He separates from us all the enemies of our soul, and then destroys forever all the things that have harmed and deformed us.

Under this view, the Lake of Fire is not a torture chamber where anybody's essential self, spirit or body are cast into flames for eternity. Rather, the Lake of Fire is God's final deliverance of those souls who “neglected their so great a salvation” by not taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. These souls have allowed “enemy grafting” to occur in their heartland. And now they are in the crisis of Hell because of it.

But God will not pull them by up their roots and destroy them totally. GOD WILL INSTEAD PRUNE BACK WHATEVER BRANCHES ARE NOT OF HIM. He will then hurl these branches into the Lake of Fire. What will be left is a transformed man, a born-again man, a man with no mask. 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 clearly envisions such a separation.

For Christians who win the crown of an overcomer, there is little if any wood, hay and stubble to separate and burn by flame. However, for the lost, the burning will be intense and they will lose much, but they themselves will be saved. The lost will have their part in the lake which burneth with fire, but their part will be their wood, hay and stubble and not their “essential selves.” Rev. 21:8.

The Bible authors pervasively used a literary technique called “personification.” The ancient writers personified most everything. Personification is the representation of an object, concept, trait, or quality AS IF it were a person. Again, wicked nations become wicked notions. External giants become internal strongholds of fear. Wisdom and foolishness, in the Book of Proverbs, are both personified as women lifting up their voices in the street. Consider Paul’s personification of sin ruling as a king in his body, and the “old man” and “new man” as personifications of two warring persons in the new creature after baptism.

So, for Paul to say that the personification of all the dark dynamics within us will be destroyed is ultimately a wonderful thing, even though it appears as a fearful thing on THIS side of the cure.

Let me propose a thought experiment to highlight this dynamic.

Assume for moment that we each have a cancerous brain tumor which is impacting our mental perceptions, morality, and moods by causing us to act erratically, selfishly, violently, and destructively. The cancer has altered our personality and created a false identity, a villainous personae with hostile intent, fearful delusions, toxic traits and unhealthy values.

Now, further assume our father is the world’s best surgeon. He has tried to treat us from our youth onward with a healthy diet, cleansing habits, and other non-invasive techniques. But, we simply have not invested in treatment. We refuse to believe we are really sick and have refused to cooperate. We have become more and more codependent towards our cancerous and false-selves. We have returned again and again to carcinogenic habits, carcinogenic thoughts, and carcinogenic actions which have so warped our perceptions.

Our brain sickness worsens over the many decades of our life. We eventually become bed ridden. We have gotten to the point where we can’t even remember who our father is. We still vaguely recognize his kind face when he comes to our bedside, but we can’t place him. Now that we have finally become totally immobile, our father enters the room. He tenderly strokes our foreheads and confidently tells us it is now time. We are too weak to resist his treatment any longer. He informs us he is going to perform surgery on us and remove and destroy the cancer within us.

When we awake from surgery, we instantly know we are different. We feel a thousand pounds lighter. Our personality has changed. No, that’s too mild a word— our personalities have been transformed into something brighter and better. An appalling appendage has been removed. We don’t recognize ourselves anymore. The memory of who we were has now been revealed as a delusion, a malignancy now removed. The old fears, the old lusts, the old hostilities, are all gone.



We now see things, everything, differently. The old “carcinogenic self,” corrupted with a thousand dark distortions, is gone. Our father-surgeon enters our recovery room with a jar in his right hand. Inside the jar is the removed tumor which has diseased our lives. He briefly jiggles the jar to show us the tumor, and then makes this statement: “This cancerous-identity will never afflict you again. I am casting him/her/it into a medical incinerator. The angelic nurses have nicknamed this incinerator ‘the lake of fire.’ This is because the sickness will be forever drowned in flames, forever submerged and contained by a wise firewall, never more to afflict any living thing.”

As we consider his words, we ask ourselves, “Why did the father-surgeon refer to the tumor as a he, she, or it?” Then the answer comes. It DID have a personality. It DID have a mindset. It DID have emotions. It DID seem alive. It DID have a voice other than my own, although it was often disguised as my own. So, even it was ultimately revealed as an “it,” it also seemed to be some sort of living personage, albeit an inauthentic one.