

3. WILL GOD SAVE MY UNCLE OR WILL HE BURN UP?

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In our previous article we briefly demonstrated that the wicked who die in their sins will not **burn on** in conscious never-ending torment. In spite of its popular acceptance, “**infernalism**” owes more to Greek and pagan traditions than to sound Biblical exegesis.

In *Framing the Flaming Question* I was happy to conclude that my dear uncle--- and your loved ones who apparently die “lost” --- will not be forever dangling in literal flames over the abyss with the Devil jabbing them with his pitchfork at every opportunity!

As we continue our investigation into the Bible’s teaching on the eternal destinies of all human beings who will be raised from their graves in the **Second Resurrection**, we come to the second possibility: The wicked will **burn up**.

CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY

So let’s look at this option. It’s called **Conditional Immortality [CI]** or **Annihilationism**.

CI states that human beings do not possess by nature an “immortal soul”. Only God Himself possesses immortality and we are invited to share His life through union with Christ (**1 Tim. 6: 15-16** and **2 Tim. 1: 9-10**). **He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life (1 Jn. 5: 12)**.

Conversely, **Conditional Immortality** holds that the wicked will be denied the gift of “eternal life” --- they will not enjoy the Life of the Age to Come. They will perish in their sins, which is to say, they will be sentenced to extermination by being finally cast into the **Lake of Fire which is the second death (Rev. 20: 14)**. They will **burn up** in an instant never to live again.

However, unlike atheists and humanists who believe that at death men and women simply cease to exist with no consequences for their behaviours, **CI** teaches that annihilation will only come after God’s righteous judgments have been individually faced following the **Second Resurrection**.

God alone has the say in the giving and taking of life. God alone says when and how that will happen! Since we live in a moral Universe everybody not included in the **First Resurrection** of the righteous will give an account of their lives to their Creator.

Conditionalism is very clear about one thing: When the Bible talks about death it means the total decomposition of the entire person. That is to say, once destroyed in **the Lake of Fire**, those folks will never come back to conscious embodiment at any

future age or stage. As Jesus solemnly warned, God is able to **destroy both body and soul in hell [Gehenna --- the Lake of Fire]** (Matt. 10: 28). (¹)

We have already noted in the previous article, that with the destruction of **Sodom & Gomorrah** to ashes, and with the extinction of those sinners by **eternal fire**, that we have an historic example which both illustrates and preempts the final judgment of sinners (2 Pet. 2: 6; Jude 7). Thus, **the punishment of eternal fire** is defined as to irreversibly perish from that age --- definitely not to be agelessly perishing.

BURNED UP IN THE FURNACE OF FIRE

Jesus told a parable which also graphically illustrates this truth. It's about the weeds --- which are a metaphor for the incorrigibly wicked --- being gathered and **burned up** at the **harvest** at the close of this age (Matt. 13: 30). The Greek word for "burned up" is a very strong and comprehensive word and means to utterly consume by fire. (²)

Jesus' interpretation of the parable is that **likewise** the wicked who **practice lawlessness** will be **thrown into the furnace of fire (vs. 42)**. Thus, Jesus' parable of the burned up weeds is a description of **Gehenna** which is the tragic destruction of the wicked who are cast into **the Lake of Fire which is the second death (Rev. 20: 14)**.

Furthermore, we must note Jesus' images are lifted straight from his OT Scriptures;

For behold the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch ... and the wicked ... shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing, says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 4: 1-3).

When the fire which consumes unto ashes is described as **unquenchable (Mk 9: 43,48)**, the idea is **not** that it **burns on** endlessly (chaff does not take long to burn) but to emphasise that the fiery judgment cannot be prevented until it completes its work. God's condemnation of evil is inescapable, inevitable and irreversible. (³)

All similar OT passages indicate that the destiny of the persistently wicked involves the **total annihilation** of their persons --- **body and soul** --- through death. Their life will be totally withdrawn. They are then extinct! (⁴) (⁵)

¹ The Greek word for "destroy" is *ἀπόλλυμι/apollymi* and means to put out of the way entirely, to abolish, to utterly ruin or mar, to be lost. Context must determine whether it is to be taken metaphorically or literally. In the Synoptic Gospels it is consistently literal and is often translated "to slay" or "to kill".

² *κατακαίω/katakaiō* is a "combination" verb and means to totally burn up, to consume completely by fire.

³ The church historian **Eusebius** twice says the Christian martyrs were consumed in "**unquenchable fire**" [Church Hist. Vi.41] and **Cyril** calls the fire that consumed the burnt offering on the altar, "**unquenchable**" (Lev. 6: 12-13)[De ador.lib.x] The idea is that the fire is unquenchable until its purpose is accomplished.

⁴ Similar passages are Is. 1:31; Jer. 4:4; 7:20; 17:27; Ezek. 20: 45-48; Amos 5: 6, etc.

⁵ It would be impossible to list all the verses in this little article, but here is a sample (in addition to those already cited) Ps. 1: 3-6; 21:9; 37: 20; 92: 7; Is. 1: 31; Dan. 12: 2; Matt. 7: 13-14; 10:28; 25: 46; Lk. 20: 34-36; Jn. 3: 16, 36; 5: 24; 8:51; Rom. 2: 6-8; 6: 23; 8:13; Gal. 6: 8; Phil. 1: 28; 3: 19; 2 Thess. 1: 9; 2 Thess. 2: 8-10; Heb. 10: 27, 39. I Jn. 5: 11-12, etc.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS? (6)

Someone may wonder: But what about **the rich man and Lazarus in Hades (Luke 16: 19-31)**? Isn't this a portrayal of a dead man surviving --- **burning on** --- and suffering in the flames of hell's torment forever?

There has been a long-standing debate in Christian theology between the **burn on Infernalists** --- who argue the story is nonfiction and therefore, a very historical account of two real persons --- and the **burn up Annihilationists** who argue it is just a parable whose specific details should not be pressed literally.

The primary reason the **burn on** school marshalls to support their literalist view is that, in no other parable which Jesus told is there a personal name attributed to any of the characters. That's why this story is different, they urge. **Lazarus** is named, so he must have been an historic individual known to Jesus and his audience. (7)

Since **Lazarus**, it is argued, must be a real person, it follows that the other graphic details must also be taken as literal truths. Even *The Expositor's Greek Testament* suggests, **This story is hardly a parable.** (8) *The NIV Study Bible; Tenth Anniversary Edition* also supports this literalist view;

Hades is the place to which the wicked dead go to await the final judgment. That torment begins in Hades is evident from the plight of the rich man ... Hades includes the torment that characterizes hell (fire, Rev 20:10; agony, Rev 14: 11; separation, Mt 8:12). Some understand Jesus' description of Abraham's side and Hades in a less literal way. (My underlining.)

I have no intention here of entering into all the *pros and cons* of this tussle. I will cut to the chase and shortly give one irrefutable reason as to why this story is a parable and in no way a picture of literal suffering which **begins in Hades** --- allegedly as a foretaste of the even worse state of **the torment that characterizes hellfire!**? (9)

PERSONIFICATION

I am sure Jesus was working within good Jewish linguistic practice when he personified **Hades**, the grave, on this occasion. (10) This is why I think the Jews in Jesus' audience would have understood that he was not to be taken literally. He was personifying the post-mortem state to make a searing point against the Pharisees. They professed faith in a future life but did not live in conformity to that belief (**Lk 16: 29**). Hypocrites!

⁶ The rich man is sometimes named **Dives** which is a transliteration of the Latin for "rich man" -- a post-biblical appellation! And the Hebrew equivalent of the Hellenized **Lazarus** is **Eleazar** meaning, "whom God has helped".

⁷ As a matter of fact they did know a **Lazarus**, who as it turns out, had died and been raised up by Jesus (**Jn 11:43-44**). But of course, the name was very common in First Century Judaism and is not unheard of to this day!

⁸ Edited by **W. Robertson Nicoll, M.A., LL.D.**, Vol. 1, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1956, p 587

⁹ For a complete treatment of the Hebrew understanding of the nature of man and what happens at death see my chapter **Another Hope** in my book, *They Never Told Me This in Church!*

¹⁰ For instance, **Isaiah 14: 9ff** where **the grave below is all astir to meet** the wicked king of Babylon who is about to die and descend to face those he once ruled over! Sheol is portrayed as a ravenous beast with emotional feelings!

Jesus' mainly Jewish audience would have held the Hebrew view that at death both men simply descended into a state of *unconscious* decomposition in the grave. ⁽¹¹⁾ They would have automatically understood him to be speaking figuratively when he said;

The beggar Lazarus died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side, and the rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades he lifted up his eyes ...

Probably there were also some in the audience who were familiar with Greek mythology. The Greeks knew **Hades** as the god of the underworld, whose name later morphed into the generic name for the nether world itself.

So, it is true that those Gentiles schooled in Greek and pagan philosophy would have had no problem with dead people still being conscious. For them, at death, the "eternal soul" could at last be set free from its entrapment in the physical body to survive consciously into eternal reality.

The story therefore had (and still has) great appeal because it straddles both worldviews. But this does not mean that Jesus' doctrine did not remain absolutely tethered to his OT moorings that *the dead are dead*.

WHY THIS IS A PARABLE

Both the **burn on** and the **burn up** schools *agree* that **the Lake of Fire** is Gehenna and not the grave, i.e. not **Hades**. Did you note the first sentence in the quote from *The NIV Bible* above, how they concede that **Hades is the place to which the wicked dead go to await the final judgment?** Observe carefully how **Revelation 20: 14** indicates that;

Hades is going to be totally emptied on the Great Day when **the books are opened**. **All** the dead who have been in **Hades (the grave)** will then be resurrected "to face the music". Thus, **Revelation 20:14 places the throwing of death and Hades into the Lake of Fire at the end of history!** Scripture is adamant:

Then I saw a great White Throne and the one who sat on it ... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened ... and the dead were judged according to their works ... **Death and Hades gave up the dead ... and all were judged ...** (Rev. 20: 11ff). So;

To interpret the story literally introduces the difficult anachronism that the [rich] man is already being tormented by fire, even though the event of Revelation 20: 14 has not yet taken place. ⁽¹²⁾

In simple language then, we may be certain this is a parable because it **antedates the Great White Throne judgment**, while Jesus' story mentions ***others who are still living on the earth*** whilst the two men are still in **Hades**.

¹¹ The story is specifically addressed to the Pharisees who **loved money and who were sneering at Jesus** (Lk. 16: 14)

¹² *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Revised Edition)* Volume 10, Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, Gen Editors, Zondervan, 2007, p 266

The rich man in Jesus' story (what an oxymoron!) don't forget, pleads for somebody to go to his brothers who are *still alive on the earth* so as to warn them to repent while there is still time *before* they die.

Let's repeat: *Hades is going to be totally emptied* on the Great Day when all the wicked dead in the tombs are resurrected and when **the books are opened**.

A LITTLE BIT OF CONSISTENCY PLEASE

There is another allied reason why I personally reject the **Infernalist** interpretation.

If literally true, **the rich man** has already been punished for over 2,000 years, and still awaits to be brought back up only to be then told at the **Great White Throne** judgment that he is going back down to endure the flames of a far worse place, **Gehenna**, forevermore!?

Doesn't this make our God maliciously capricious? He is toying with the dead!?

Don't forget that **father Abraham** has already explained to him why he is not entitled to one drop of soothing water; "**Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony ...**" (v. 25).

Why the need to raise him up to hear the horrible sentence *again*? He *already knows* why he is in torment. He therefore surely does not need to be brought up from **Hades** to be told yet again of the reasons for his horrid fate to which he is again descending! Our human courts do not toy with the condemned in that way.

Conversely, **if literally true**, **Lazarus** has already been enjoying his eternal rewards before the rest of the righteous --- and that even before Jesus had been resurrected from the grave himself!?

He is already said to be in **Abraham's bosom** --- a common Jewish expression for the joys of the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom of God. **On this score Lazarus entered the Kingdom before Jesus himself!?** (¹³)

So, **if literally true**, the story is teaching that the timing of our individual births at any point in history is a huge advantage or disadvantage, for it can add to the length of our enjoyments or to the length of our torments! The "accident" of when our birth happens in history, on this count, adds an element of caprice to our whole human existence, surely?

¹³ This scenario also is not true for the simple reason that the NT teaches the OT saints and NT Christians are going to be glorified all together only at the *Parousia* when Christ returns to inaugurate the Kingdom on earth (**Heb. 11: 39**).

If literally true, then **Hitler** has suffered less than the rich man!? If a man dies “lost” and goes immediately to be tormented in the flame, then it’s far better to have died in the year A.D. 2021 than the First Century!

And if a man dies “unsaved” and is immediately in the grave being consciously punished, then **the rich man** has had a huge advantage over, say, a **Cain**, who must have already been in torments for thousands of years longer for he was a murderer!?

CAPRICIOUS DOMITIAN

If literally true, the story reminds me of that tyrant emperor of Rome, **Domitian**.

Domitian reigned from AD 81-96, and according to the Roman historian **Suetonius**, he once invited one of his stewards to dine with him in his private apartments --- to recline in his presence, to eat from his dishes, to share in the delicacies normally reserved for only the most powerful man in the world and his cherished intimates.

It was the highest honour the steward had ever received or could ever have hoped for; it was certainly nothing he would ever have imagined he had any right to expect.

The next day **Domitian** ordered that the steward be crucified!

Now that is impressive, **David Hart** opines, for it was as grand a demonstration of absolute sovereignty as one could ever imagine, and perfect proof of how immeasurably far above the level of the ordinary categories of good and evil such sovereignty operates.

It showed with utter clarity that the gifts imparted by absolute power are entirely gracious, and that those upon whom they are bestowed have no right to presume them; and it proved just as emphatically that such power is, for this very reason, bound to no common measure of justice or mercy, and so properly reveals itself in the sheer capriciousness of its malice no less than in the lavishness of its largesse. (¹⁴)

In my humble opinion, **Conditional Immortality** which teaches that the incorrigibly wicked --- in spite of all God’s gracious invitations and in spite of all His serious warnings --- will **burn up** instantly to pass away in death irreversible in **Gehenna** --- has the advantage of not only being far more humane, but also does not malign the holy character of God as does the **Infernalist burn on** belief.

The God of all the earth will judge fairly, righteously, lovingly, mercifully. He says what He means and means what He says. Once cast into **the Lake of Fire**, the dead will be dead. We must take His word seriously. As the **Conditionalist Edward Fudge** explains it;

Few things are stated more often throughout the whole Bible than that the wicked will ‘die,’ ‘perish,’ ‘be destroyed,’ ‘pass away,’ ‘be no more,’ and ‘be forgotten for

¹⁴ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, Yale Uni Press, USA, 2019, p 50

ever'. The fact that we deal with the language of divine law and justice only strengthens the case for giving the words their most essential and ordinary meanings. (¹⁵)

NOT THE END YET

Now, you may accuse me of being driven by sentimentalism but, for me, this is still not necessarily the end of my quest for good closure. I think there is still more to consider.

Please forgive the *double entendre*, but the question *Will God Save My Uncle Or Will He Burn Up?* remains a burning question, even though I am far happier to conclude that to **burn up** is a far, far better outcome than to **burn on**.

For the peace of my mind, and in the interests of good Biblical enquiry, we will consider the third possibility, but it must wait until next time ...

¹⁵ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case For Conditional Immortality*, Second Edition, Paternoster Press, UK, 1994, p 182