

5. WILL GOD SAVE MY UNCLE ... IN THE END?

Some Reflections on Universal Salvation

www.thebiblejesus.com

Having considered that some who arise out of the **Second Resurrection** may be offered their first ever opportunity to hear the Gospel --- based on the fairness of God and a few precious hints in Scripture --- we left our previous article with the tantalising *possibility* of a **Wider Hope**.

If true, this group will no doubt be overjoyed to find their names in **the other book of life** --- for their deeds will be found to have overall matched the character and values of God's eternal Kingdom. They will learn how the atonement of Christ avails for them too, and so they will be saved by the same grace that is available to all. ⁽¹⁾

And now we come to the challenging task of asking what is to be the final fate of all the rest whose works do not meet the test? We are told they will be cast into **the Lake of Fire**. But what exactly is this fate? There are only three possibilities for these wicked;

Either, they will **burn on** in the flames of eternal and conscious torment in **Gehenna** (as popular evangelical **Infernalism** would have it). We have seen that this prospect does not seem to have solid Biblical support, even though it has a lot of "push" behind it from traditional Christian teaching, at least since the early Middle Ages;

Or, the wicked will **burn up** in the flames of the **Lake of Fire** (as held by **Conditional Immortality**). The wicked are exterminated in the **second death**. This fate is not only a far more godly and humane option, but has substantial Biblical support;

Or, as we shall now touch upon, the unrepentant wicked will **burn through** the **Lake of Fire** to emerge at some later age --- via a process of refining judgment --- to be ultimately saved. It's called **Ultimate Reconciliation [UR]** or **Universal Salvation [US]**.

By the way, we could state these alternatives more euphemistically: There is the **Narrow Hope** (only those whose names are found written in the **Lamb's book of life** are guaranteed to rise immortal in the **First Resurrection**); then there is the **Wider Hope** (those whose names are found entered in **another book of life**) following the **Second Resurrection**; and there is the **Widest Hope** (meaning that ultimately God is going to save everybody out from the **Lake of Fire** in one of the ages beyond).

¹ God **overlooked the times of ignorance** which enveloped the world before Christ (**Acts 17: 30**):- The atoning sacrifice of **the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world** (in God's eternal counsel) covered the sins of all who looked forward to the first coming of Christ (the faithful Jews) and those who lived according to the light they had by nature (the Gentiles). This principle is no different since the appearance of Christ. Multitudes still have and do live in ignorance of the offer of salvation in Christ. May we not therefore anticipate that the same God will also **overlook the [present] ignorance** of those who have never heard the Gospel of the Kingdom of God when they are raised at the end?

UNIVERSAL SALVATION

Simply stated, **Universalism** teaches that in the end when Christ hands over to his God a Kingdom harmonious and triumphant, that all human beings who have ever been born will finally enter the joys of untold ages to come. The whole family of Adam will be reconciled, reunited at last under the God of heaven. Not one “lost sheep” will be lost!

Universal Salvation holds there will be nobody **burning on** in everlasting conscious torment, nor will there be anybody who has **burned up** in total dissolution either. **Universalism** affirms the grave does not, cannot finally triumph. God’s life must conquer and must swallow up death. Ultimately God will be **all in all** to everyone who has ever existed. (I Cor. 15: 28). (²)

In this view **Gehenna** is for corrective purposes. “Hell” will purify --- not destroy the person (the Roman Catholic teaching on purgatory comes to mind). **The Lake of Fire** thus becomes a metaphor for positive rehabilitation and the means to ultimate salvation.

Practically it means that folks like the traitor **Judas Iscariot** who was guilty of egregious treachery towards his Lord, or cowards like **Pontius Pilate** who condemned Jesus to torture although he knew Jesus was an innocent man, or even mass murderers like the Roman Caesars, **Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Kim Jon-Un et al** will finally join the throng of the blessed after enduring varying degrees of reformation.

To most Christians this sounds like dangerous heresy designed to sap the evangelical fervour out of our Gospel endeavours --- not to mention the lax living it encourages in our individual living.

However, **Universal Reconciliation** assures us that this is the only outcome worthy of our great and all-loving Father for;

Our Saviour God desires everyone to be saved and to come to a full knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and also one mediator of God and human beings: a human being, the Anointed One Jesus, who gave himself as a liberation fee for all ... (1 Timothy 2: 3-6). (³) And;

We have hoped in a living God who is the savior of all human beings, especially those who have faith ... (1 Timothy 4: 10).

Universalists say these are unambiguous doctrinal statements on soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). If language means anything then **God is the Saviour of all human beings** --- not only of **those who have faith** presently in this life, but of those who are going to obtain faith in life after this life.

² The more “extreme” forms of the doctrine believe that, at the very last, even the Devil himself and all his demonic hosts will finally be reconciled to God and praise Him forevermore.

³ The word **desires** is θέλω/*thelō* which means to intend, will, wish, desire, purpose, delight or have pleasure in.

GOD'S SWORN OATH

Universalists insist these declarations are undergirded by nothing less than the sworn oath of the Almighty himself. God will finally win the worship of every knee and the praise of every tongue because it's backed by the unchanging character and sworn oath of our holy God no less;

“As surely as I live,” says the LORD, “every knee will bow before Me; every tongue will confess to God” (Rom. 14: 11; Phil. 2: 9-11).

The ultimate surrender to God of a fully restored cosmos will bring about His purpose to **reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through the blood of His Son, shed on the cross ... (Col. 1: 20)**. What is this but an iron-clad guarantee that those who died in an unreconciled and rebellious state will finally come to the full knowledge of the one true God through Jesus Christ?

Multitudes therefore, are destined to have a **Saul on the Road to Damascus** conversion experience once all the irresistible power of God's redeeming love is seen. They will fall on their knees, they will see the dreadfulness of their estranged condition, and they will cry out, **“Lord, what do you want us to do?”** And how possibly could His gracious and loving heart not respond when He hears their cries for mercy as he did to the one who confessed he was **the chief [foremost] of sinners (1 Tim. 1: 15)?**

Thus **Universal Salvation** believes even the stupidity and folly of the most incorrigible of sinners will not, cannot, thwart this cosmic goal to which God is bringing all things. **“As surely as I live,”** is God's sworn oath guaranteeing everyone's ultimate salvation! Sound convincing?

A LITTLE KNOWN PIECE OF HISTORY

Before we write off **Universalism** as a bit of sentimental wishful thinking which can't bear to think of our loved ones missing the joy of God's Kingdom, or before rejecting it as a dangerous 'heresy' which offers a false hope by ignoring all the warnings in the Bible to the contrary, perhaps some little-known church history might give pause to reconsider.

Although **US** is almost unheard of in the churches today, you may be surprised to learn how strongly held and taught it has been from the earliest of Christian times.

Many of the so-called “Church Fathers” are on record as believing in **UR**. **Irenaeus, Theophilus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose, Didymus, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Hillary, Titus, Diodorus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus of Turin, Theodoret, Peter Chrysologus** all did. ⁽⁴⁾ ⁽⁵⁾

⁴ For quotes of each of these **Universalists** see [Appendix VII: Early Church Leaders Testify](#) in *Hope Beyond Hell: The Righteous Purpose of God's Judgment* by **Gerry Beauchemin**, Malista Press, Olmito, TX, 2007.

⁵ I am not a big fan of the “Church Fathers” who mixed Christianity with Hellenism and came up with synchronistic solutions to many of the questions of the day (the doctrines of the Trinity and the two-natured Christ among them). My purpose in mentioning them is to acknowledge that **Universalism** is not a Johnny-Come-Lately teaching.

As a representative of these, the Fourth-Century church “father” **Basil of Caesarea** (c. 329-379) observed that; The large majority of his fellow Christians (at least, in the Greek-speaking Eastern Christian world that he knew) believed that hell was not everlasting, and that all in the end would attain salvation. (⁶)

In fact, all the historical evidence suggests that the universalist faction was at its most numerous, at least as a relative ratio of believers, in the church’s first half millennium ... They even believed in hell, though not in its eternity; to them, hell was the fire of purification described by the Apostle Paul in the third chapter of Corinthians, the healing assault of unyielding divine love upon obdurate souls, one that will save even those who in this life prove unworthy of heaven by burning away every last vestige of their wicked deeds. (⁷)

Dr. Edward Beecher D.D. (conservative American theologian b. 1803- d. 1895) wrote;

What was the state of facts regarding the leading theological schools of the Christian world in the age of Origen and some centuries after? It was, in brief, this:

There were at least six original theological schools in the church at large. Of these six schools one, and only one, was decidedly and earnestly in favour of the doctrine of future eternal punishment. Two were in favour of the annihilation of the wicked.

Two were in favour of the doctrine of universal restoration on the principles of Origen and two in favour of the principles of Theodore of Mopsuestia ... [so] there were four times as many Universal Salvation theological schools where clergymen were educated as there were schools in which endless punishment was taught, even as late as A.D. 300.

But from that time onward as darkness increased the non-Christian, non-Jewish ideas were more and more transferred to the Bible till it entirely obscured the truth.(⁸)

Historian **Ethelbert Stauffer**, author of *Christ and the Caesars* and *New Testament Theology*, wrote;

The primitive church never gave up the hope that in His will to save, the ‘all-merciful’ and ‘all powerful’ God would overcome even the ‘no’ of the self-sufficient world. (⁹)

Evidently the doctrine of the final salvation of every man, woman and child was widely held in the early days of the Christian church, perhaps even the majority position in the immediate centuries after the apostles. It has historic pedigree.

So much for the history lesson. What of the Scriptures?

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 2

⁷ **David Bentley Hart**, *That ALL Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, Yale Uni Books, 2019 p. 1

⁸ For further study of this history read, **Edward Beecher’s** *History of Opinions on the Scriptural Doctrine of Retribution*.

⁹ As quoted in *Universal Reconciliation* by **Michael Phillips**, Eureka, CA: Sunrise Books, 1998, p 44

THE UNIVERSALISTS' CASE FROM THE SCRIPTURES

One of today's most articulate US advocates is **David Bentley Hart**. He writes that;

There are a remarkable number of passages in the New Testament ... that appear to promise a final salvation of all persons and all things, and in the most unqualified terms ... To me it is surpassingly strange that, down the centuries, most Christians have come to believe that one class of claims --- all of which are allegorical, pictorial, vague, and metaphorical in form --- must be regarded as providing the "literal" content of the New Testament's teaching regarding the world to come, while another class --- all of which are invariably straightforward doctrinal statements --- must be regarded as mere hyperbole. It is one of the great mysteries of Christian history (or perhaps of a certain kind of religious psychopathology). ⁽¹⁰⁾

Hart is incredulous that, on the one hand we can see that the ovens/furnaces are metaphors, and that the wheat and the chaff, the barred doors, the debtors' prisons, the deathless worms and inextinguishable fires are mere figural devices within the embrace of an extravagant apocalyptic imagery that, in itself, has no strictly literal elements.

Hart defends universalism not only by arguing for the pre-eminence of those passages which are doctrinal statements on soteriology, but also by the brute force of [their] arithmetic. He alleges the apparently (i.e. obviously) most explicit statements on the last things --- universalist statements --- are by far the more numerous.

Hart's method is commendable. The sheer numbers of statements about the last things we read in explicitly "doctrinal" passages on soteriology must be given precedence over those contexts which are parabolic, apocalyptic and symbolic. Agreed. He is a competent Greek linguist and a master logician which enables him to construct a powerful argument for the ultimate salvation of all.

Besides the two verses from **First Timothy** we have already noted, where it is stated in no uncertain terms that **God is the Saviour of all humans**, **Hart** cites such verses as;

Romans 5: 18-19: So, then, just as through one transgression came condemnation for all human beings, so also through one act of righteousness came a rectification of life for all human beings; for, just as by the heedlessness of the one man the many were rendered sinners, so also by the obedience of the one the many will be rendered righteous.)

1 Corinthians 15: 22: For just as in Adam all die, so also in the Anointed [Christ] all will be given life.

Titus 2: 11: For the grace of God has appeared, giving salvation to all human beings

I John 2: 2: And he is atonement for our sins, and not only for ours, but for the whole cosmos.

¹⁰ *Op Cit.* pp 94

This is only a sampling of the texts **Hart** adduces for universalism, but his final one is for him a slam-dunk;

1 Timothy 4: 10: We have hoped in a living God who is the savior of all human beings, **especially** those who have faith.

He says this is an auspicious place to pause, at the point of that odd, disorientating final qualification --- that **especially**. God is the savior of all human beings, **especially** those who have faith. What after all could it possibly mean?

Hart's exposition is rather convoluted, but distilling it right down (I imagine **Hart** would be horrified at my over-simplistic effort) he adopts the typical **US** belief that God is going to refine even the most incorrigible sinner through various judgments until they finally see reason and have no other rational choice but to accept God's offer of salvation in Christ.

He argues that no human being in possession of all the facts and alternatives is a masochist wishing upon themselves ongoing judgments. (It's kind of like that oft-used illustration that the only thing better than banging your head constantly against a brick wall is realising how good it feels when you stop!)

Just so, in the end, nobody will be able to resist God's corrective judgments and so they will ultimately come to see the sense in embracing His eternal love in Christ for them. No matter what it takes, no matter how long it takes, God has ages to work with! In the end, love wins! (¹¹)

If the **Universalists** are right, perhaps there is hope for my uncle yet? But are they right?

(To be continued ...)

¹¹ *Op Cit.* pp 102 if you are keen to read **Hart's** argument. He makes the astounding claim that **I Tim. 4: 10** contains two distinct eschatological horizons, one enclosed within the other. There is the more proximate horizon of historical judgment (where the good and evil in all of us are brought to light by whatever means necessary) and the more remote horizon of an eternity where a final peace awaits every human being. **Hart** claims those who have surrendered to God's will --- the **especial** ones who put their faith in Christ today --- will avoid the self-imposed hell which the rest of humanity must go through before they can finally see sense and be saved. **Universalists**, like **Hart**, opine that Paul and other NT writers promise two distinct resolutions to fallen time: the end of history in a final judgment and then, beyond that, the end of judgment in a final reconciliation.