

Dan Barker: "What the Hell Is This?"

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When it comes to the question of everlasting torment in Hell, Dan Barker expresses the thoughts of many:

"Probably the worst of all of Jesus' ideas is the teaching of hell. He did not invent the concept of eternal punishment, but the promotion of the Christian doctrine of hell originated with Jesus. In the Old Testament, hell is just death or the grave. With Jesus, hell became a place of everlasting torment. In Mark 9:43 Jesus said that hell is "the fire that never shall be quenched." In Matthew 13:41-42, Jesus gives us a graphic (and almost gleeful) description of the place he created: "The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Hitler's gas ovens were horrendous and the suffering was unspeakable, but they did not burn forever. The murdered victims of the Holocaust suffer no more, but the victims of God's anger will scream forever and ever." (1)

Barker goes on to testify that he does not believe in Jesus or in God so,

"I qualify as 'one of those things that offend' in the above verse. Anyone who thinks it is moral for someone like me a person who has used reason and kindness to come to conclusions to be eternally punished for my views hasn't the faintest concept of morality. Any system of thought or any religion that contains such a threat of physical violence is morally bankrupt. For this reason alone, Jesus deserves to be denounced as a tyrant." (2)

So, has Barker accurately represented an 'almost gleeful' Jesus who will consign human beings to the fires of everlasting conscious torment? Will the Bible Jesus really cast all those who 'offend' and who work 'iniquity' into 'the furnace of fire' where their screams will be heard forever? Is the Bible Jesus a cruel tyrant who is "morally bankrupt"?

Barker is outraged that Jesus could consign to eternal agony in hell, one like himself who uses "reason and kindness" to reach his conclusions about God. It is as though he stands before God with a clenched fist defiantly saying, "What the Hell is this?"

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Note that Barker says Jesus did not invent the concept of Hell but developed it from the Old Testament idea that hell is "just death or the grave." Perhaps

unwittingly Barker has stumbled upon the way to solve his objections concerning the Hell Jesus seems to have taught?

I mean, nowhere does the Old Testament envisage perpetual suffering for anybody. Indeed, I would wager a guess that most Christians who hold to a Hell where the wicked will forever scream in tormented agony have no idea that Jesus actually built his doctrine of the final punishment of the wicked on his understanding of the Old Testament. So if we want to understand what Jesus said about Hell then we must understand his Hebrew Bible!

Many Bible believing commentators have alerted us to the fact there may be a hiatus between Jesus and the popular notions of hell. Even evangelical commentators who believe that Hell is a literal place and that its duration is forever do not for example, interpret the fire imagery literally. Well known figures such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, C.S. Lewis, Billy Graham, D.A. Carson, and J.I. Packer, all understand the fire images non-literally.

Other conservative theologians, such as Charles Hodge, Carl Henry, and F.F. Bruce agree. Any number of notable contemporary scholars and pastors can be added to that list, such as Millard Erickson (author of [Christian Theology](#)), John Blanchard (author of [Whatever Happened to Hell?](#)) and Timothy Keller (Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York and author of many top selling books).

The highly regarded Anglican scholar [Leon Morris](#) is representative of these cautionary voices:

“ The fact of Hell is certain. The nature of Hell is less clear. It is true that the fate of the finally impenitent is spoken of in terms of “the hell of fire” (Matt. 5:22). But it is also spoken of as the “outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12), and it is further described in terms of the “worm” that “does not die” (Mark 9:48). It is not always easy to connect the realities of fire, darkness, and a place where the worm does not die. And this is only the beginning [of seemingly contradictory pictures of Hell] .” **(3)**

Few realise how the force of 2,000 years of Church tradition has shaped our Bible reading on this [and other] doctrines. But are we really prepared to accept the authority of the Scriptures over manmade pronouncements? Our challenge as always, is to discipline ourselves to read out of what is actually

there, not to read our traditions and culture back into the Bible.

WORMS THAT DON'T DIE AND FIRE THAT'S NOT QUENCHED

As Barker mentions, one of the most quoted and graphic of Jesus' pronouncements on hellfire is this one:

“And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire ... And if your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched ” (Mark 9:43,4748).

Dan Barker wants us to believe Jesus created and popularised these images. But the fact of the matter is that Jesus was quoting his Hebrew Bible! His reference to worms never dying and an unquenchable fire is lifted directly from the very last verse in the book of Isaiah ...

“Then they shall go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; And they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind” (Isaiah 66:24).

So, we must interpret Jesus' theology in a way that is faithful to His Hebrew worldview. If we do this we will see that Jesus is not talking about people consciously screaming and suffering forever. So, let's look at the all important context of Isaiah's final chapter. This, hopefully, will keep us from projecting unhelpful concepts onto the Bible Jesus.

Isaiah is painting a contrast between the blessing of the righteous and the final end of the wicked. The faithful who listen to God's word are promised comfort and peace in a **“new heavens and the new earth”** that will **“endure before Me” (Isaiah 66:.22).**

In contrast, those who reject God's word and who mistreat His people will experience God's fiery judgment. Specifically, when God sends His retribution of fire and sword upon the wicked, **“those slain by the LORD will be many” (Isaiah 66:16).** On that Day **“all [surviving] mankind will come to bow down before Me”** and the [surviving] righteous people will **“go forth and look on the**

corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched. And they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind” (v.24).

As you can see, the context from which Jesus’ famous words are quoted has nothing to do with everlasting conscious torment in hellfire. It has everything to do with looking on dead corpses rotting on a field after a battle in the last days (could it be the future Battle of Armageddon?).

God’s judgment upon these wicked folks is severe, yes. But it’s finished. Although there is no doubt a thankfulness to God for their salvation, there’s no gloating over people writhing forever, either. What remains is the appreciation of God’s mercy and severity (**Rom. 11:22**).

What’s it all mean? It is very possible Isaiah’s vision is remembering and reproducing some of the greatest of God’s judgments upon her enemies from the past. Just as God left Pharaoh and his army of destroyed corpses in the Red Sea, (and Israel rejoiced in their Divine deliverance), and just as God left the Assyrian armies as destroyed corpses outside Jerusalem (and Judah looked on their corpses and rejoiced in God’s protection), so Isaiah prophesies a similar scene of dead corpses of the ungodly after a future judgment battle (**Ex. 14:30; 2 Kgs. 19:35**).

Isaiah prophesies a picture of the dead corpses of God’s enemies decomposing with flies, maggots, and worms. Their bodies will be burned. The worms and the fire are thus pictures of death and extinction. It’s definitely not a picture of the wicked suffering endless torments and screaming evermore. The Hebrew Bible knows no such thing.

Throughout the Old Testament ‘fire’ is that which consumes the wicked, thus ending their existence (eg.**Ps.21:9; 68:2; Is.33: 1014; Zeph. 1:18**). Indeed, the very last chapter in the Old Testament speaks of the judgment of fire on the arrogant and every evildoer as the judgment of a burning furnace where they will be completely devoured like “chaff” and left as “ashes” (**Malachi 4:13**). Again, the fire produces irreversible results. Its work is done.

Jesus builds on this image of a devouring furnace in his parable of the weeds,

“Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire , so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin, and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:40-42 NRSV).

Jesus is teaching from the last chapter of the last book in the Old Testament classic Malachi, elementary Old Testament! He is not inventing anything. He is faithfully expounding his Hebrew Bible. Just as Malachi’s burning furnace devours everything to ashes, Jesus says the wicked are like weeds “**burned up**”, which is to say, consumed not conscious.. Even his phrase “**there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**” is lifted straight from his Old Testament. Rather than comment on this expression myself, here is excellent commentary by another,

“Many readers have formed the habit of reading into this phrase an implication of eternal suffering, but this is entirely unwarranted. There will indeed be suffering, but there is no indication at all, here, how long the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” are to continue. Furthermore, this phrase, once again, is based directly upon Old Testament precedent and depicts reaction, not so much to ongoing punishment, but rather to God’s adverse intervention as such. The “weeping” expresses impotent, frustrated, perhaps regretful, rage against God and the redeemed, before “melting away” (Ps. 112:10). Jesus’ expression certainly reminds us forcefully, that facing God’s judgment unprepared will be a heartrending ordeal, but says nothing about perpetual misery.” **(4)**

SODOM & GOMORRAH

At least twice in the New Testament the judgment of the wicked is likened to the destruction by fire that Sodom and Gomorrah experienced in past history, “**And if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes , having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter ...**” (2 Peter 2:6).

“**Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them ... are exhibited as an example , in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire ...(alternatively the NASB margin, “as an example of eternal fire in undergoing punishment ...”) (Jude 7 NASB).**

Note, the sudden and complete destruction of the wicked in Sodom and Gomorrah is said to be the classic example of **“the punishment of eternal fire.”** If we want to know what “eternal fire” is, then what happened in that moment of God’s judgment in history is the example par excellence. Here is the Old Testament template ...

“Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities ... and all the inhabitants of the cities ... Now Abraham arose early in the morning ... and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace . Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley ...” (Gen. 19:24-28).

The smoke Abraham saw that morning was clear evidence that God had irreversibly and utterly reduced those cities to ashes. The inhabitants were dead. There was no coming back. The New Testament calls their momentary judgment, **“the punishment of eternal fire”!**

“Eternal fire” in this context from which Jesus and his disciples were working, points to a judgment whose effects are complete destruction **“reducing them to ashes”** that is, a penalty that will not be reversed. The **“smoke”** that ascends is proof they are **“ashes”** and conscious no more. Thus, to suffer **“eternal fire”** does not mean those so judged continued to suffer and scream endlessly in hellfire.

Whether it be any prophet in the Old Testament, or whether it be Jesus or Peter or Jude in the New Testament, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as a model for God’s future judgment reserved for the wicked. Once God’s patience is finished, once the unrepentant have persistently refused God’s calls for mercy and salvation, once their hearts are set upon wickedness, and once God’s judgment falls, the effects of that judgement will be final with no escape.

In conjunction with the fire, Jesus also uses the phrase **“and these will be cast into outer darkness”**, to describe the final fate of evildoers. Again, the figure of **“outer darkness”** comes straight from the Old Testament as a common description of the judgment of God . [Warren Prestidge](#) again expertly

comments,

“This phrase combines the figure of “darkness” frequently associated with Judgment Day in the Old Testament (Zeph. 1:15; Amos 5: 1620, 8:910), with the implication of exclusion from God’s presence. Together, darkness and fire “fix” for us the invariable twin implications of God’s adverse final sentence: rejection and annihilation.” (5)

GOD IS ABLE TO DESTROY BOTH BODY AND SOUL IN HELL.

This fate of everlasting, total and nonreversible destruction as opposed to Dan Barker’s popular misconception of everlasting conscious suffering in hellfire is something Jesus did warn about,

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One Who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt.10:28).

Unless we are tempted to think Jesus is teaching a dualism that our bodies are only the outer houses in which our “real selves”, our “immortal souls” are released at death, compare Luke’s record of the same teaching,

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But fear Him who after killing the body, has power to throw you into hell . Yes, I tell you, fear Him” (Luke 12:4f).

A careful comparison of the two statements shows that to be thrown into hell describes the destruction of the entire person forever ... “body and soul”. Even Dan Barker believes there is nothing beyond the grave, just total extinction of the person!

What Jesus is saying is that the worst that can happen to his followers is that men might kill them, but they will not be obliterated forever. Men’s ability to kill stops with the body because it is limited by the bounds of this Present Age. But unlike Barker, Jesus teaches that death inflicted is not the end of some individuals.

The story of his disciples’ existence does not stop when they die in this Age. There will be a resurrection of the believer’s entire being, here termed, “body and soul”, for God remembers them. But God’s power to kill and destroy the wicked is without limit and reaches beyond this temporal spacetime existence. As a matter of interest, Jesus’ sequence of “kill” and “destroy” is the

same as described in **Isaiah 66**, where God's enemies are slain, then consumed by fire.

BUT DON'T 'ETERNAL LIFE' AND 'ETERNAL FIRE' BOTH LAST FOREVER?

A study of the Old Testament usage of 'soul' indicates the word means man in his individual wholeness and entirety. When the body dies the soul perishes. The soul does not live independently of the body.

It's often argued that in the very verses where Jesus promises "eternal life" to his own 'sheep', that he also warns of "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment" to the lost 'goats'; therefore, since 'eternal life' must mean conscious existence forever, why doesn't 'eternal fire' similarly mean conscious existence forever?

Then he will also say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels ... and these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:41,46).

Ah yes, this is where we need to read the Bible out of its own setting and not out of our own imagination and inherited tradition. As we have already noted, the Old Testament example of Sodom and Gomorrah is that "eternal fire" does not mean an everlasting conscious burning, but speaks of a fire whose design is the complete and irreversible destruction that ends in "ashes". In other words, the effects of the punishment are forever, but the process is finite. It is not eternal punishing. Life is consciousness. Death is dissolution of the person.

THE APOSTLE PAUL

In keeping with this distinction, the apostle Paul gives a message of comfort to those Christians who are suffering terribly at the hands of their persecutors. Concerning these wicked tormentors, Paul says,

"And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power ..." (2 Thess. 1:9).

The NASB translation adds one word that subtly alters what Paul wrote. It reads that these ungodly folk will "pay the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord ..." The word "away" is not in the Greek text. It gives the unwarranted nuance that the ungodly will be conscious after their

separation from the Lord.

The NIV translation also adds a verb that is not in the Greek text. It reads, “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord ...” That second verb “shut out” is added by the NIV translators, and gives the impression also that those who are judged with the penalty of “eternal destruction” will be forever conscious of being shut out from God’s beautiful presence.

The careful reader will observe that the punishment the wicked will receive “on that day” when Jesus returns is described as “eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:9-10).

Their punishment will not be happening forever. It’s limited to a certain day. Nor is the fiery appearance of Jesus in judgment described as bringing eternal suffering to the wicked. Yes, they will suffer horrible anguish for their deeds in the short term when they realise they will not enter the glorious Kingdom but will suffer the penalty of eternal extinction.

Once again we can only lament the fact that our translators have cut themselves loose from the foundations of the Old Testament. Like his Master teacher Jesus, the apostle Paul draws this picture directly from the Hebrew Bible (see for example, Ps.68:2).

ETERNAL SINNING?

If we still struggle with this concept that “eternal punishment” or “eternal fire” does not mean “eternal burning ” then it will help to think of other things said to be eternal, things which clearly do not go on for all of eternity. Take for example, Jesus’ term, “eternal sin”,

“Whoever blasphemes against the holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin ” (Mark 3:29).

Here was a crowd who were saying Jesus’ miracles were of the Devil. Incredible! Jesus was actually doing the works the prophets had said would prove who was their Messiah. But against such clear evidence, against the light, they refused Jesus’ person and ministry. Jesus warns them this is an “eternal sin”. As [Edward Fudge](#) explains,

“It was ‘eternal’ because it resisted and contradicted the power of the Age to Come. It stood in opposition to the inbreaking kingdom of God ... Here the act (of sinning) does not continue forever. It was committed during that occasion in Jesus’ ministry and may possibly never be repeated in exactly the same way. Punishment in hell is due for sins committed during this Present Age, not for evil done following the last day (Rom. 2:6-16). This ‘eternal’ sin was committed once. But its result remains for eternity.” (6)

Thus, an “eternal sin” should not be read to mean “eternal sinning”. It is a sin committed in this present time whose consequences have everlasting and irreversible implications.

ETERNAL JUDGING?

The same principle applies to “eternal judgment” as found in **Hebrews 6:2**. Christians are urged to leave behind “**elementary teaching**” and go on to maturity. One of the “elementary” teachings concerns “**the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement**”. Observe that the resurrection of the dead (probably referring to the resurrections of both the wicked and the righteous dead) results in “**eternal judgment**”.

Note it definitely does **not** say, “eternal judging”! Once God has passed sentence, the result of His judgment will stand forever. Nobody will be left standing before God being sentenced forever! The process of judgment is not everlasting. Once the gavel of God’s justice has fallen, there will be eternal consequences, but not an eternal process of judging. So,

“As we become familiar with the symbolism used by the Old Testament prophets, we learn to grasp the meaning of the same language when it is used in the New Testament, by Jesus and the men he chose, to warn us of the great ‘day of the Lord’. To that same extent we will be free from the temptation to attach to biblical expressions other meanings of modern derivation, meanings which have no basis in Scripture and which sometimes contradict its consistent normal usage.” (7)

THREE CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON THE ULTIMATE DESTINY OF THE WICKED

We have reached a point where we may assess the three traditional views about the final fate of the wicked.

1. The traditional and most widely accepted view on the final punishment of the wicked is the one Dan Barker is protesting against. This view assumes that humans have “immortal souls” and will suffer everlasting torment. Historically

this view has dominated Christendom since the Fourth Century when [Augustine](#) (heavily influenced by the Greek culture around him) made it fashionable. The traditional view says we have one chance to get it right with God this life right now so turn or forever burn!

2. The second view is called Universalism. It teaches that God's love and wisdom will never give up on the process of refining every single human being until we are all finally and ultimately reformed and made fit to live in fellowship with God forever. Every human being will be continually offered opportunity for as long as it takes to respond to the Gospel.

This view also assumes that human beings have "immortal souls". The Roman Catholic teaching on Purgatory, where Christians will be refined and prepared ultimately for heaven, is a subplot under this heading. The Universalist teaches we may have many lifetimes to get it right with God whether in this present age or in various ages of reform to come.

Eventually all will get the message that existing away from God's glory is a very bad life so turn now or turn later, but turn you will because His grace is ultimately irresistible.

3. The third view is called Conditionalism (short for Conditional Immortality, or CI). This view does not assume human beings are born with inherent immortality, with "immortal souls". The saved are given immortality at the Second Coming of Jesus when he raises them again. The unrepentant are not given immortality when they are brought forth from their graves, but are punished with permanent and irreversible annihilation ... personal nonexistence.

The Conditionalist teaches we have one chance to get it right with God this present life right now... so turn or be extinguished forever!

[Rob Bell](#) dropped a bombshell on the Church when he released *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Bell released a storm of debate by endorsing universalism.

Essential to two of these views is the belief in the natural "immortality of the soul." The cornerstone of both the doctrines of everlasting conscious torment

in hell and of universal salvation is the belief that man has a “soul” that can never die. Conditionalism on the other hand teaches that if man is to live forever beyond death, it will be because God Who alone has immortality grants him immortality on certain conditions. Immortality is a gift, not a natural inalienable right. Jesus himself said immortality is given to the faithful when they are raised again,

“For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life , even so the Son also gives life to whom he wishes” (John 5:21).

Here Jesus explains that having life and being raised from the dead are synonymous: No resurrection ... no [eternal] life! The righteous dead will only be given such life when they are raised by the Father through His agent and Son, Jesus. In other words, for man to live beyond the grave, he must be raised up by God and given life. Jesus taught that eternal life [literally, “the life of the Age to Come] is conditional upon being raised again.

Ah, but it may still be objected, aren't the wicked dead also raised by God to live again when Jesus returns? Didn't Jesus teach this just a few verses further down?

“Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds, to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29).

So, it will be argued, if it takes the resurrection to give life to the righteous for the Age to Come, then why won't the wicked also be raised immortal so they can be forever conscious in hell? Can't God give the unrepentant sinner the capacity to endure eternal suffering, just as He will give the saved the capacity to live forever in His Presence?

Good question. However, it ignores the Biblical evidence that the wicked are raised for a judgment to condemnation which is called “the second death” (Rev. 20: 14). And in the Bible, death is dissolution of individual consciousness.

To be raised to die again surely means the wicked are not raised immortal? To

be raised to die a second time must mean the wicked are not raised incorruptible nor immune to further death. So yes, the Bible teaches that all men who have ever lived will be resurrected, but it is only the righteous who will be given immortality. Throughout the New Testament, resurrection to immortality is depicted as a privilege given only to followers of Christ.

In the book of the Revelation John says those blessed to rise in the first resurrection are the ones over whom the second death has no power (**Rev. 20:6**). This means that believers in Christ are given immortality at the first resurrection. However, the ones who are then described as **“the rest of the dead”** that is the unrighteous do not come to life until after the Thousand Year Messianic Kingdom.

But note it well: This second group once resurrected are still called **“the dead”**. It is **“the dead”** who stand before the Great White judgment Throne of God to receive their second death sentence (**Rev. 20:12**). Although temporarily resurrected, **“the dead”** are still mortal for they will perish in Lake of Fire.

The metaphor of **“the Lake of Fire”** is explained as **“the Second Death.”** We may be sure **“the dead”** are not raised with “spiritual bodies” like those of the redeemed (**I Cor. 15: 44**). Their bodies are still mortal, reflecting their still sinful dispositions destined for the second death from which there is no return.

With this the apostle Paul agreed. He wrote in **I Corinthians 15:53** to Christians that **“this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality...”** Paul understands that in this Present Age even ‘born again’ Christians are mortal, corruptible, and perishable. If we are ever to become immortal and incorruptible for eternity, it must happen when Jesus returns and raises us to the life of the Age to Come.

This means Paul is in agreement with Jesus and John, that humans are not born with immortal souls. For Paul immortality is reserved as a privilege for believers only in Christ. Indeed, Christians look with eager anticipation to that Day when we will become possessors of “spiritual bodies” which will be imperishable and therefore not subject to the Second Death.

The Bible teaches that even in this present life each of us “lives and moves and has our being” because “God Himself gives to all life and breath” (Acts 17:25,28). In our stupidity and pride we can imagine we have independent existence apart from our Creator, and exist purely by natural forces. The fact that we can exist in this age or the next age only because of God’s gift of life to us will become painfully clear only too late to all who choose to live this life independently of Him.

WHY ARE THE UNRIGHTEOUS DEAD RAISED JUST TO BE CONDEMNED TO DEATH AGAIN?

It will be asked that if the wicked dead, according to Conditionalism, are in a state of dissolution, why would God be so cynical as to rouse them from their unconscious bliss, only to then obliterate them out of all existence again? This makes God seem cruel, which only brings us back again to Dan Barker’s charge that a God who acts this way is immoral and tyrannical. I can think of at least five good reasons why the wicked dead must be resurrected to stand before the judgment of God before they hear their sentence and die a second time, never to be again conscious.

First, God says so. Like it or not, accept it or not, the Bible says God is going to raise all men, good and bad, and all who have ever lived are going to be judged and either rewarded or punished for their works. Barker and his friends will of course, hotly deny that God,

“Now commands all men everywhere to repent: Because He has fixed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

A PERSONAL STORY

Let me illustrate from a personal experience. I remember an occasion when one of my children had been threatened by a school bully. This ‘toughie’ was notorious. And for some reason he decided to pick on my son. My son refused to back down. He was not going to be intimidated.

I found out there was going to be a big fight after school. The whole school

was going to be there. The day and time were set. But what was I going to do? Let the fight go on knowing my boy might get really hurt? My son told me that under no circumstances was I to intervene. You can imagine I was in an agony of soul. Should I contact the school principal? Should I contact the police? Should I turn up to the fight myself? You have no idea unless you are a father who has faced similar situation the troubled state of my mind.

Against my lad's wishes, that afternoon I got in the car and drove to the oval where all the buses from all the schools congregated. I sat in the car and watched my son and the 'enemy' approach each other. It was on! At that instant, a couple of hundred kids surrounded the two combatants. My view of the fight was now obstructed.

Oh, what acute agony I went through that moment. Not being able to see. My imagination was running out of control. I went to get out of the car numerous times. Then I did get out of the car, but my feet were stuck. I had made a promise not to get involved. But how I wanted to run over and belt the living daylights out of this kid whom the police had told me was just a thug with no respect for his parents, teachers, police, or any law. I wanted to teach him a lesson. In my burning desire for my son's well being I felt I could have belted the life out of that bully.

Somehow I managed to sit through the whole ordeal, not seeing any of the 'action'. All I could do was ask God to please keep my boy alive and not let the damage be too great. Thankfully, the kids dispersed after some minutes (which of course to me, seemed like an eternity). My lad was still alive and caught his bus home. I arrived home before him a trembling, nervous wreck. I never told my boy till many moons later that I had been there at 'the fight'.

So why do I mention this? To make the point that my Heavenly Father has promised that His love burns for His children. Unlike me, who had promised not to intervene, God has warned He is going to ultimately put to rights every injustice from every wicked bully against His precious children. And my Father does not lie.

Second, we humans instinctively know that justice must be seen to be done. This cry for justice arising from the human heart is a part of our being created

in the image of God. Anybody who has suffered cruelty such as verbal or physical abuse, rape, the theft of their goods and property or wages won by diligent and honest labour, the oppression of cruel dictators, the murder of their innocent children and family, etc. etc., instinctively cries out for justice. This is a powerful reason why the unrepentant wicked in this world cannot be allowed to die peacefully and just disappear into the universe without ever facing their sin.

The universal cry is, **“How long O Lord, until You avenge our name, our blood, our innocence?”** Where does this universal cry for justice in the human heart arise from? This is a powerful argument that God Himself has locked into every human heart.

It's why Paul could appeal to the persecuted believers in Thessalonica, **“For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you ... (2 Thess. 1:6).**

Third, varying degrees of punishment must be carried out for justice to be seen to be done. In decent human society different crimes require different penalties. A parking fine does not receive a jail term. A violent rape and murder of an innocent girl is not atoned for by a good behaviour bond. We instinctively know that some criminals should be locked up and the key never found again. Jesus himself taught that even some generations will receive the greater sentence because they received greater privileges. He warned, **“It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you” (Matthew 11:24).**

Just as there will be varying degrees of reward and glory for the righteous, so it is only fair that each rebel will suffer their own commensurate degree of suffering and remorse before actually being condemned to the extinction of the Lake of Fire. It is not right for the wicked just to die the first time never facing their own culpability!

Fourth, God's faithful people, the saints, must be vindicated before the world that spurned them. From the time Cain murdered his own righteous brother Abel all the way down the ages, those who have lived good and holy and gentle

lives before God have been mocked, rejected, persecuted, slain by this world of Godhaters. If these wicked tormentors just die never having to face the wrath of a holy God who loves good and beauty and kindness and gentleness, then the saints suffer now in vain.

The apostle Paul comforts the persecuted Christians in Thessalonica by assuring them that when Jesus is revealed with his mighty angels from heaven at his Second Coming, he will **“inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious might when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed”** (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).

Indeed, a recurring theme in the Scriptures is that the people of God will rejoice when God vindicates their faithful service. And that reward will be handed out in front of everybody, displayed before heaven and earth. It will be the same principle as the hardworking student who gets his presentation before the school assembly, and hears, “Well done!”

Fifth, God must raise the dead so He can demonstrate to the Universe that He is the Sovereign Lord over life and death. There is going to be a universal day of reckoning where every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that God is the Lord of all. Not only will all men who have opposed His goodness be there to acknowledge that the God of all the earth is fair and righteous, but we are assured the Devil and his angels will also acknowledge God’s Sovereignty over them. Wow! Imagine that. The goodies actually win! A Day of universal glory for Good when everything that offends decency and peace is finished forever more.

The Devil who sought to destroy the innocent Job by murdering his children, by destroying his property, by causing his sickness and pain, will get his payday! The murderous Antichrist will be there. Hallelujah! Our God is just and righteous and the universe is a moral universe after all. It will finally be seen that all things have worked together for everlasting good because God is all loving, all wise, all powerful. The universe will wonder at God’s plan for the ages.

There will be “myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands” (the way the ancients talked about infinite numbers!) saying with a loud voice from every quarter of all creation,

“Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created” (Rev. 4:11; 5:1114).

Oh, I want to “cast my crown before Him” and praise Him for His saving grace in Christ. Don’t you?

CONCLUSION

The popular idea of people eternally suffering and screaming in unrelieved burning agony is foreign to Jesus and the God of the Bible. Images of “eternal fire”, “worms never dying”, “outer darkness”, “weeping and gnashing of teeth” are all terms lifted straight from the Old Testament. In their original Hebrew context from which Jesus taught, all such descriptions of God’s judgment upon the wicked speak of destruction but never of endless suffering.

On the other hand, the righteous will receive the reward of God’s grace in Christ as the gift of the life of the Age to Come. Yes, Jesus does warn that our lives have eternal significance. That’s why it’s wise to seek the Lord now while He may be found, and to prepare to enter His kingdom. A Jesus who is a morally bankrupt tyrant belongs to medieval and dare I say it (?), to pagan accretions, added into the Church after Jesus. It shows Dan Barker does not know what the hell he is talking about! Better to listen to Jesus and his message of the coming Kingdom of God!

ENDNOTES

1. Barker, Dan. *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America’s leading Atheists*. Ulysses Press, Berkeley, CA. 2008. p181
2. *Ibid*, p181
3. Leon Morris. *The Dreadful Harvest*. Christianity Today , (May 27, 1991): 3438. PDF File.
4. Prestidge, Warren. *Life, Death and Destiny*. Resurrection Publishing, Auckland, NZ. 1998.

p 78-79

5. Ibid, p79 (Italics original)

6. Fudge, Edward William, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*. Paternoster Press, UK. 1994. P 17-18

7. Ibid, p 59