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PRESUPPOSITIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Throughout most of church history, the doctrine of eternal condemnation has been accepted by the majority of Christians as a fact taught in Scripture. However they describe the nature of hell and whoever they define as the inhabitants of hell, most Christians believe that some people are eternally separated from God. The separation may entail everlasting conscious torment or a long period of punishment followed by annihilation or the state of being away from the presence of God, but there is agreement that the wicked will be sentenced to a place or a condition from which there is no escape.

This essay is a call to re-examine our presuppositions regarding the doctrine of hell and to consider how they have influenced our interpretation of Scripture. We will look at a number of verses that seem to present a different picture of God's ultimate purposes and man's final destiny, suggesting that there may be an alternate paradigm that better accounts for the truths that have been revealed in Scripture. The challenge is to step back and scrutinize our basic assumptions to make sure they are correct, so that the interpretations built upon them will also be true. So settle in for a long chapter, or better yet, read it little by little, with open Bible, open mind, and open heart.

Many years ago I was in a crowded grocery store on a busy Saturday afternoon. I was making my way toward the checkout area, where dozens of people were jostling for a place in one of the long, amorphous lines. A rather large woman

with bulgy eyes and a grim, mean-looking face was pushing her carriage in my direction. Suddenly she crashed right into another carriage, and I thought, “What a jerk, trying to force her way into the line!” But a second later I regretted the thought. In a very kind voice, the woman apologized profusely to the other person. “Oh, I’m *so* sorry. I just had an operation on my eyes, and I can’t see very well.”

My assumption that she was mean and was trying to butt in line was dead wrong; the bulgy eyes, the determined look on her face, and the collision with another customer had an entirely different explanation—that she had had an operation on her eyes and could not see well and was trying to focus. Although it happened a long time ago, I have never forgotten that incident; it reminds me that the assumptions I make about a situation can lead to a completely wrong interpretation of it. If I stop to check my assumptions, I may end up looking at the situation through an entirely different lens.

A much more powerful example of such a paradigm shift is recounted by Stephen Covey in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. He was on a subway in New York when a man and his children boarded. The children were loud and annoying, but the father closed his eyes and did nothing. The irritation of the other passengers was mounting, and Covey finally asked the man if he might control his children a bit. The father lifted his gaze and said, “Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.”¹ As Covey learned the true nature of the situation, he experienced an instant shift in his attitude. He realized that his presuppositions had been wrong—he was seeing not bratty children with a negligent father, but rather a grieving family. The way he viewed the situation changed because his framework for understanding it had changed.

We all bring presuppositions into every area of our belief systems. We view the world through the grid of a lifetime of accumulated experiences and teachings, from the time we

were little children to the present. Whether we're aware of it or not, we interpret what we see and hear and read according to the framework we have developed; in other words, we tend to form our interpretations on the basis of what we already believe.

With respect to our Christian faith, it is good to have strong convictions about what we believe, but we also must be willing to take a hard look at our assumptions and to change if we have been wrong. It is a healthy exercise to allow our presuppositions to be challenged—if we are wrong, we want to bring our beliefs more in line with the truth; if we are right, then answering a challenge will strengthen our convictions.

An example of interpretations being influenced by presuppositions is the New International Version Study Bible, which I was using as my principal translation for Bible study. The annotators believe in eternal damnation, and I started noticing that their exegesis (and sometimes even the translation itself) reflects that belief. There are several passages where the notes say, in effect, “this verse doesn't really mean what it seems to say, because the apparent meaning contradicts the doctrine of eternal punishment, which we already know is true.”

To illustrate, one such verse is 1 Timothy 2:4 (Passage 1), which says that God our Savior “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” The NIV note says, “God desires the salvation of all people. On the other hand, the Bible indicates that God chooses some (not all) people to be saved.” In support of this statement, 1 Peter 1:2 is cited: Peter is writing to “God's elect...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ.” (Note that this verse does not say that the “elect” go to heaven and the rest do not; it says that the elect are chosen “for obedience to Jesus Christ.”)

The note goes on to give two interpretations of the Timothy passage: “Some interpreters understand the passage to teach that God has chosen those whom he, in his fore-

knowledge, knew would believe when confronted with the gospel and enabled to believe. Other interpreters hold that, though human reasoning cannot resolve the seeming inconsistency, the Bible teaches both truths and thus there can be no actual contradiction. Certainly there is none in the mind of God.” The note does not even mention the possibility that God not only *wishes* that all men would be saved but will actually make it happen.

The passage continues, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time” (vv. 5–6). Again Paul indicates that the work Jesus did on the cross was for *all* men. You could make a case that the phrase “a ransom for all men” means that the ransom works for *anybody* who comes to Christ, regardless of rank, race, or nationality. However, the plain sense of the verse is that Jesus’ sacrifice was intended for all human beings and fulfills God’s desire that all be saved.

Later in the same book, Paul says “we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:10, Passage 2). Here the note says of the phrase *Savior of all*, “Obviously this does not mean that God saves every person from eternal punishment, for such universalism would contradict the clear testimony of Scripture. God is, however, the Savior of all in that he offers salvation to all and saves all who come to him.” Only if you have already concluded that God does *not* save everyone from eternal punishment is it “obvious” that the verse means that He does not save everyone from eternal punishment. Otherwise, the verse *does* seem to say that He saves all.

In the NIV, Titus 2:11 (Passage 3) reads, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” The verse actually says, *Epephanē gar hē charis tou theou hē sōtērios pasin anthrōpōis* (Ἐπεφάνη γὰρ ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ σωτήριος πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις). Other translations properly put “to all men” (*pasin anthrōpōis*) with “bringing salvation” (*hē sōtērios*). For example, the New American Standard reads, “The grace of

God has appeared, *bringing salvation to all men.*” By translating the verse as it does, the NIV has no need to comment on the verse because the translation has already been fitted to the interpretation the NIV supports.

In Galatians 1:8 and again in 1:9 (Passage 4), the Greek word *anathema* (ἀνάθεμα) is translated “eternally condemned.” (“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!... If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”) Anyone reading this passage would think that eternal condemnation is an indisputable fact of the Bible. However, the sense of “eternally” is not inherent in the word; the Greek word has pretty much the same sense as the English cognate—cursed, banned, reviled, or denounced, not *eternally* damned.

In Colossians 1:19–20 (Passage 5), Paul says, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” The note says of the phrase *reconcile to himself all things*, “Does not mean that Christ by his death has saved all people. Scripture speaks of an eternal hell and makes clear that only believers are saved.” But the verse seems to say that the cross accomplishes the reconciliation of *all things* to God. In order to conclude that this verse “does not mean that Christ by his death has saved all people,” you have to bring to it the presupposition that only some are saved. [For an extended exegesis of Col. 1:15–20, see “Reconciliation: The Heart of God’s Grand Plan for Creation” (#7).]

Once I experienced the paradigm shift with respect to my assumption of eternal damnation, I started seeing how deeply (and how unknowingly) my presupposition had affected my understanding of the New Testament. For decades I had completely missed ideas that now seem plain. The well-ingrained belief in a traditional hell has had a tremendous impact on our interpretation of Scripture.

Here are a number of other NIV notes that interpret verses not according to their plain sense but according to a predetermined belief in eternal damnation. Try to look at each one with fresh eyes.

- 6) Verse: And all mankind will see God's salvation (Luke 3:6, quoted from Isaiah 40).

NIV note: *all mankind*. God's salvation was to be made known to both Jews and Gentiles—a major theme of Luke's Gospel.

My comment: The note waters down the force of the verse. The verse says that *all mankind* will see God's salvation, but the note says that God's salvation is *made known to both groups*—Jews and non-Jews—implying that only some from each group will really experience God's salvation.

- 7) Verse: But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself (John 12:32).

NIV note: *all men*. Christ will draw people to himself without regard for nationality, ethnic affiliation or status.

My comment: The note subtly changes the sense from *all men* to *all kinds of men*—that is, not all people from every group but some people from every group. See also John 6:33 (“For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life *to the world*.”)

- 8) Verse: For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! (Romans 5:15)

NIV note: *the many*. The same as “all men” in v. 12 [“...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned”]. *how much more*. A theme that runs through this section. God's grace is infinitely greater for good than is Adam's sin for evil.

My comment: The notes acknowledge that the phrases “the many” and “all men” refer to all of humanity when it comes to sin and death, but not when it comes to grace and life. Yet at the same time, the notes say, “God’s grace is infinitely greater for good than is Adam’s sin for evil.” Is God’s grace able to conquer sin completely and redeem as many people as sin has destroyed, or isn’t it?

- 9) Verses: Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (Romans 5:18–19).

NIV note: *life for all men*. Does not mean that everyone eventually will be saved, but that salvation is available to all.

My comment: The verses have parallelism. One trespass brought condemnation for all men; one act of righteousness brought life for all men. The disobedience of the one man causes many to be sinners; the obedience of the one man causes many to be made righteous. The extent of the *all* or the *many* in the second half of each verse is the same as the extent of the *all* or the *many* in the first half of each verse. [For a fuller discussion of the parallelisms in Romans 5, see “By the Righteousness of One,” #19.]

- 10) Verse: For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all (Romans 11:32).

NIV note: *all men*. Both groups under discussion (Jews and Gentiles). There has been a period of disobedience for each in order that God may have mercy on them all. Paul is in no way teaching universal salvation.

My comment: Again the note assumes that Paul can't possibly be teaching universal salvation, so therefore the verse must not mean what it seems to say, i.e., that God will have mercy on all.

11) Verse: For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).

NIV note: *in Christ all will be made alive.* All who are “in Christ”—i.e., who are related to him by faith—will be made alive at the resurrection.

My comment: The *all die* is universal, but the *all will be made alive* is not?

12) Verses: For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (2 Corinthians 5:14–15).

NIV note: *for all.* For all mankind. *therefore all died.* Because Christ died for all, he involved all in his death. For some his death would confirm their own death, but for others (those who by faith would become united with him) his death was their death to sin and self, so that they now live in and with the resurrected Christ (v. 15). However, some hold that Paul is not speaking specifically here about the scope of Christ's atonement but about the effect of Christ's death on the Christian life. Thus “all” would refer not to mankind in general but only to the church.

My comment: The note suggests that Christ's death “for all” means “for all mankind,” but for some of them “his death would confirm their own death” (i.e., they remain dead in their sins). Another possibility given is that “all” refers “not to mankind in general but only to the church” (i.e., He died only for the church, and the passage is talking “not about the scope of Christ's atonement but about the effect of Christ's death on the Christian life”). The more natural reading, which

requires no fancy interpretation, is that Jesus did indeed die “for all” (i.e., all mankind), as stated in both verses, and that all died in Him. The passage goes on to say “that God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (v. 19). Our mission is to implore people on Christ’s behalf to be reconciled to God (v. 20)—that is, to put their trust in Him.

- 13) Verses: Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9–11).

NIV note: *bow...confess*. Cf. Isa 45:23. God’s design is that all people everywhere should worship and serve Jesus as Lord. Ultimately all will acknowledge him as Lord (see Ro 14:9), *whether willingly or not*. [Emphasis added]

My comment: In 1 Corinthians, Paul declares that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (12:3), i.e., unless the Holy Spirit in him enables him to recognize Jesus as Lord. Compare to Romans 10:9—“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Here confessing Jesus as Lord is clearly genuine; it means agreeing to the truth that Jesus is Yahweh and that He is Lord of all. It is parallel and complementary to believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead. It is not simply a grudging assent or a forced submission. (If, as the note in Philippians claims, some are unwillingly acknowledging Him as Lord, then they are like the naughty little boy whose mother told him to sit in the corner, and he said, “I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside.”) Did God

send His Son to die on the cross just so He could coerce everybody into bending the knee and saying the words “Jesus is Lord”? No! His purpose is that all be in genuine worship and submission to Him. The phrase “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” in Philippians 2:11 has the same structure and meaning as “confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’” in Romans 10:9; this confession is willing and heartfelt, and God’s will is that ultimately *every tongue* will be doing it! As Revelation 5:13 says, “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them” will be praising the Lamb. [See “Is God Like Gargamel the Great?” (#23).]

14) Verses: He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power (2 Thessalonians 1:8–9).

NIV note: *destruction*. Not annihilation (see note on 1 Th. 5:3). Paul uses the word in 1 Co. 5:5, possibly of the destruction of the “flesh” (see NIV text note there) for the purpose of salvation. Since, however, salvation implies resurrection of the body, annihilation cannot be in mind. The word means something like “complete ruin.” Here it means being shut out from Christ’s presence. This eternal separation is the penalty of sin and the essence of hell.

My comment: This whole paragraph is about the just judgment of God. The just penalty for those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel is “eternal destruction *apo* (Greek: ἀπό) the presence of the Lord.” But does this destruction in the age to come mean that they will forever be excluded from the presence of God? As Thomas Talbott² points out, the idea of being “shut out” from the presence of God is not in the Greek text. It was inserted by the NIV translators,

who give the preposition *apo* the meaning of “away from.” Although *apo* sometimes does mean “away from,” in other contexts it means “coming from,” as in the familiar greeting “Grace to you and peace from (*apo*) God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The American Standard Version translation of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is preferable: “eternal destruction from the face of the Lord,” meaning that God is the one who brings about the destruction of the wicked, just as He is *the source* of grace and peace. So the NIV note correctly states that this “destruction” is not annihilation in the sense that the person who is wicked goes out of existence, but it misses the point that God’s glorious presence and the majesty of His power and the blazing fire serve to destroy the wickedness and purify the person. The verse referred to in the NIV note, 1 Corinthians 5:5 (“Hand this man [who sleeps with his father’s wife] over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord”), actually supports the idea that the “destruction” is of that which is sinful, with the ultimate purpose of saving the spirit. The destruction of the wicked does not mean that the wicked cease to exist but that they cease to be wicked.

- 15) Verse: He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

NIV note: *for the sins of the whole world*. Forgiveness through Christ’s atoning sacrifice is not limited to one particular group only; it has worldwide application (see Jn 1:29). It must, however, be received by faith (see Jn. 3:16). Thus this verse does not teach universalism (that all people ultimately will be saved), but that God is an impartial God.

My comment: The verse is interpreted not according to its plain sense (“Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is for the sins

of the whole world”), but according to the presupposition that universalism is not true (“...for the sins of people from every group in the world”). John 6:33 says that the one who comes down from heaven gives life *to the world*. Verse 37 says, “*All* that the Father gives me will come to me.” And John 17:2 says, “For you [God the Father] granted him [God the Son] authority over *all* people that he might give eternal life to *all* those you have given him.” Note the logic: Jesus will give eternal life to all those whom the Father has given Him. The Father has given Him authority over *all people*. Conclusion: Jesus will give eternal life to all people.

- 16) Verse: Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed (Revelation 15:4).

NIV note: Universal recognition of God is taught in both the OT (Ps 86:9; Isa 45:22–23; Mal 1:11) and the NT (Php 2:9–11).

My comment: This verse and the ones cited in the NIV note teach not merely universal “recognition” of God but universal *worship* of God. This verse says “all nations will come and *worship* before you.” Psalm 86:9 says, “All the nations you have made will come and *worship* before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name.” Malachi 1:11 says, “My name will be great among the nations.... In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the Lord Almighty.” These “pure offerings” are not coming from unregenerate people who are being forced to acknowledge God. Daniel 7:14 confirms that all peoples will enter into *true* worship of the Lord: “He [the one like a son of man whom Daniel saw in his vision] was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of

every language *worshiped* him.” Both Isaiah and Philippians say that “every knee will bow” and every tongue will proclaim the name of the Lord. According to Isaiah, God has made a solemn promise in His own Name that He will bring all people to humbly acknowledge Him as Lord: “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear” (Is. 45:22–23). As noted above in my comment on Philippians 2, this confession is not at gunpoint! It is willing and heartfelt, and one day every creature will join in the chorus of praise to our God!

- 17) Verse: Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13)

NIV notes: *heaven...earth...under the earth*. See note on v. 3. [Verse 3 note says about *in heaven or on earth or under the earth*, “But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it’—A conventional phrase used to express the universality of the proclamation—no creature was worthy.”]

My comment: The notes acknowledge that the phrase “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” expresses universality, referring to every created being. The praise that is offered to God and to the Lamb by every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth is not a grudging recognition of His power but heartfelt worship!

In another group of key passages that seem to teach the universal extent of God’s love and salvation, the NIV study notes almost acknowledge it or simply fail to comment on it:

18) Verses: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16–17).

NIV notes: *world*. All people on earth—or perhaps all creation (see note on 1:9). [The note about *world* in 1:9 says, “Another common word in John’s writings, found 78 times in this Gospel and 24 times in his letters (only 47 times in all of Paul’s writings). It can mean the universe, the earth, the people on earth, most people, people opposed to God, or the human system opposed to God’s purposes.”]

My comment: The note for John 3:16 says that in this case the word *world* means “all people on earth—or perhaps all creation.” In other words, it acknowledges that God loves “all people on earth—or perhaps all creation,” so much so that He gave His one and only Son for them. His purpose was that we could escape from perishing and have eternal life by believing in Him. The NIV study notes do not even mention the astounding fact stated in verse 17: that God sent His Son into the world *to save the world*—that is, all people on earth! Even more, He sent His Son to restore all creation!

19) Verse: ...[W]e know that this man really is the Savior of the world (John 4:42).

NIV note: *the Savior of the world*. In the NT the expression occurs only here and in 1 Jn 4:14. It points to the facts that (1) Jesus not only teaches but also saves, and (2) his salvation extends to the world (see note on 3:16).

My comment: This note says that Jesus’ salvation “extends to the world” and then sends us to John 3:16, where *world* is defined as “all people on earth—or perhaps all creation.” The conclusion would be that Jesus’ salvation extends to all people on earth.

- 20) Verse: And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14).

NIV note: None

My comment: Which of the definitions of *world* applies here? Compare to John 1:29, “the Lamb of God who *takes away the sin of the world.*” The NIV note says, “Jesus would be the sacrifice that would atone for the sin of the world.” Jesus will certainly *take away* the sin of the world—i.e., not just lock it up but eradicate it!

- 21) Verse: He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:21).

NIV note: None

My comment: Will God restore everything *except* the majority of humanity? Bauer’s Greek-English Lexicon (BDAG) says the “time of restoration of all things” (*chronōn apokatastaseōs pantōn, χρόνων ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων*) is “the time for restoring everything to perfection.” Thayer’s Lexicon defines the restoration of all things as “the restoration not only of the true theocracy but also of that more perfect state of (even physical) things which existed before the fall.” If these definitions are accurate, God will restore the universe to its pre-fall perfection, i.e., there will be no sin or rebellion or suffering, and all of creation will be in perfect harmony and fellowship with God.

- 22) Verse: [The ministry of reconciliation is the message] that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:9).

NIV note: None

My comment: “Reconcile” means to re-establish friendship or restore the favor of God, and this verse says that God reconciles the world to Himself in Christ, *not counting their sins against them.* If God shuts up people in hell forever, He is holding their sins against them perpetually.

23) Verse: And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ (Ephesians 1:9–10).

NIV note: *to bring...under one head....* [I]n a world of confusion, where things do not “add up” or make sense, we look forward to the time when everything will be brought into meaningful relationship under the headship of Christ.

My comment: What kind of “meaningful relationship” under Christ do the damned have? How does it “make sense” that God’s good pleasure is to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ, if the majority of humanity is left out? Will the headship of Christ be like that of a prison warden, or will He be fully Savior, Lord, Shepherd, and Bridegroom?

Finally, some passages from the Apostle Peter. The NIV translation of 2 Peter 3:9 (Passage 24) says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” The word translated “wanting” is *boulomenos* (βουλόμενός). Bauer’s Lexicon says the root word *boulomai* (βούλομαι) can mean wish/desire or can refer to “decisions of the will after previous deliberation.” The related noun *boulē* (βουλή) means purpose, counsel, resolution, decision, resolve. The NIV translation uses the weaker sense of the word *boulomenos* (“want” vs. “decree”), and the note skews the meaning of the verse: “God’s seeming delay in bringing about the consummation of all things is a result not of indifference but of patience in waiting for *all who will come to repentance*” [emphasis added]. In other words, God does not *decree* that none shall perish—He just *wishes* they wouldn’t—and His patience extends only to “*all who will come to repentance*” within a certain timeframe.

Another example of translating and interpreting a verse to suit a predetermined belief that the unsaved die and go straight to hell is 1 Peter 4:6 (Passage 25). Peter has been talking about the pagans who indulge in debauchery, lust, etc. Then he says, “But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.” The note explains the phrase *was preached even to those who are now dead* this way: “The word ‘now’ does not occur in the Greek, but it is necessary to make it clear that the preaching was done not after these people had died, but while they were still alive. (There will be no opportunity for people to be saved after death; see Heb 9:27.)”

When I first realized what that note was saying, I thought, “Wait, wait! Back up the truck! You can’t just go and add words to the text to make it say what you want!” Adding the word *now* completely changes the sense of the verse. The Greek simply says *nekrois euangelisthē* (νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη), “to the dead the gospel was preached” or “the dead were evangelized” or “the dead were addressed with good tidings.” The verse seems to say that people who had already died were hearing the gospel, the “good news,” which suggests that they were getting an opportunity to respond to it. (If it was a proclamation of judgment, it wouldn’t be very good news for them.) But the NIV note says the verse can’t possibly mean that the preaching was done after the people died, because “there will be no opportunity for people to be saved after death.” Then it cites Hebrews 9:27 as proof that people cannot be saved after death: “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” But that verse simply says that you die and then face judgment; it never says there is no possibility of salvation after you die.

When Peter says the gospel was preached to the dead, perhaps he is referring in part to something he said a few verses earlier:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built (1 Pet. 3:18-20, Passage 26).

A different word is used for “preach”—*kērýssō* (κηρύσσω), which does not carry the idea of “good news” but simply to proclaim or announce. The NIV note gives three main interpretations: that Christ preached through Noah to the wicked generation of that time; that between His death and resurrection He preached to fallen angels; or that He went to the place of the dead and preached to Noah’s wicked contemporaries. “What he proclaimed may have been the gospel, or it may have been a declaration of victory for Christ and doom for his hearers.” The note then gives the problems with all three views.

There’s another possibility that the note doesn’t even mention. What about the idea that He was preaching the gospel to those who had died before He came to earth and were in Hades, including those who disobeyed during the time of Noah? The NIV note for Matthew 16:18 defines Hades as “the Greek name for the place of departed spirits, generally equivalent to the Hebrew *Sheol*.” The word *Sheol* is often translated as “grave,” or it can mean the realm of the dead. What if these “spirits in prison” were those who had died without coming to faith and were stuck in the abode of the dead? Would Jesus offer up His life on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins—“Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God,” as Peter puts it—and then immediately go to the place of the dead and proclaim judgment, rubbing it in that they were doomed forever? Why couldn’t He be preaching the gospel, the good news, His victory over sin, release for the captives? He is the one who is anointed to preach good news to the poor, to bind

up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, and to turn their mourning into joy (Is. 61:1–3). Is Peter describing the time when Jesus “descended into the depths of the earth” and then “ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe”? (Eph. 4:9–10). Are these the captives He led in His train when He ascended on high? (Eph. 4:8). Imagine Jesus dying on the cross, descending into hell, proclaiming the good news to the prisoners there, leading them out of darkness and captivity into freedom, and ascending higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe!

Conclusion

No single verse, no single passage, no single argument can seal the deal for either eternal condemnation or ultimate redemption. The goal is to take into account the whole counsel of Scripture and try to determine the understanding that is most in line with all that we know about God’s character, His purposes, and the condition of humankind. This essay illustrates how we may inadvertently interpret the Bible to match our presuppositions, and it issues a challenge to reassess our assumptions before building interpretations on them.

Once we are aware of the fact that we filter all incoming information through our own grid, we can be very intentional about recognizing how our grid affects everything we perceive. If you have always viewed the Bible through a framework that includes eternal damnation as part of its given structure, I challenge you to try looking at Scripture through a lens of ultimate restoration. Try letting go of the assumption that eternal damnation is an indisputable fact of Scripture and an indispensable part of your faith. Be open to a paradigm shift that would allow you to see the fullness of the redemption theme throughout the Bible. And for those who already have the hope of ultimate redemption, come with me as we investigate many facets of this exquisite gem.

¹Covey, Stephen R. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. 1988. pp. 30-31

²Talbott, Thomas. *The Inescapable Love of God*. 2014. pp. 88ff

³There are still other possible instances of reading one's presuppositions into the text. Taken together with the examples cited above, they show a pattern of basing interpretations on unquestioned assumptions.

27) Verses: And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell (Gehenna, *γέεννα*), where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." Everyone will be salted with fire (Mark 9:47-49).

NIV note: Verse 48—Isa 66:24 [quoted in verse 48] speaks of the punishment for rebellion against God. As the final word of Isaiah's message, the passage became familiar as a picture of endless destruction. Verse 49—The saying may mean that everyone who enters hell will suffer its fire, or (if only loosely connected with the preceding) it may mean that every Christian in this life can expect to undergo the fire of suffering and purification.

My comment: The NIV note for verse 48 connects this passage with eternal destruction. The note for verse 49 acknowledges that "salted with fire" may refer to purification, but if so, it must be talking about what Christians experience "in this life." We should ask, why can't this "fire of suffering and purification" be in the afterlife? As Thomas Johnson says, "This description [Mark 9:48] was drawn from Isaiah 66:24, where it is applied to the dead bodies of those who have rebelled against the Lord. Is it a purifying fire, a destroying fire, or a fire of eternal conscious suffering? This passage does not give us the answer, though in context purification is suggested, since the next verse, Mark 9:49, says that 'everyone will be salted with fire,' a reference to salt's purifying function." H. Anderson notes, "We should not read into these sayings later speculations about the eternal punishment of the wicked in hell."

28) Verses: John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:16-17).

NIV note: *and with fire*. Here fire is associated with judgment (v. 17). See also the fire of Pentecost (Ac 2:3) and the fire of testing (1 Co 3:13). *His winnowing fork*. See note on Ru 1:22. The chaff represents the unrepentant and the wheat the righteous. Many

Presuppositions and Interpretations

Jews thought that only pagans would be judged and punished when the Messiah came, but John declared that judgment would come to all who did not repent—including Jews.

My comment: The notes on this passage and on Matthew 3:11-12 (parallel to Luke 3:16-17), Luke 12:49 (“I have come to bring fire on the earth”), Acts 2:3 (“tongues of fire”), and 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 (“[his work] will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work”) recognize that the image of “fire” is applied figuratively in different ways in the New Testament. The notes indicate that fire is associated mainly with judgment, and sometimes with testing or with the divine presence. They do not even mention another important purpose of fire: purification. It is assumed that the burning up of the “chaff” in Luke 3:17 refers to the destruction of *people* (“The chaff represents the unrepentant”). The idea that the chaff could represent the worthless parts of a person’s life, which are burned up in order to purify the person, is never even considered. Yet the context is about the baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire, which suggests a sanctification process. And 1 Corinthians 3:13, cited in the NIV note, is about a judgment of purification: A man’s work “will be shown for what it is.... It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; *he himself will be saved*, but only as one escaping through the flames.”

29) Verses: “Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.... [A] time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:25, 28–29).

NIV note: *is coming and has come*. Reference not only to the future resurrection but also to the fact that Christ gives life now. The spiritually dead who hear him receive life from him.

My comment: The NIV note identifies “the dead” who hear the voice of the Son of God as “the spiritually dead,” in other words, people who are dead in their sins but still physically alive. This might be a reasonable interpretation except that “the dead” are identified three verses later as “all who are in their graves.” The parallelism is strong: “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God” / “all who are in their graves will hear his voice.” Could all who are in their graves be hearing the Son of God preach the gospel, as 1 Peter 4:6 indicates (“the gospel was preached even to those who are dead”)? If so, there is hope that the dead might hear the good news and rise to live!

Confessions of a Tomboy Grandma