

The following study presents beliefs and ideas for you to ponder, explore, and perhaps make your own.

The Millennium and the End of Sin

Nothing makes decent people recoil in horror more than a sadist torturing his victim. Political and military leaders have long debated the morality of “enhanced interrogation techniques” in order to extract a terrorist’s confession and perhaps save thousands of lives. But once an army has won, the weapons surrendered, the empire safe again — what does it say about a kingdom if it follows up victory by then inflicting endless pain on those who have lost?



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It is a wonderful challenge to arrive at the point in Scripture where Christ has triumphed! Calvary has purchased our rescue; Jesus has returned to earth to redeem His trophies. Even though the expression isn’t found in Scripture, this ushers in a time period theologians commonly call the Millennium: a thousand years of time where weighty events are still transpiring.

Ten Centuries of Delight or Desolation. Some denominations feel the Second Coming will immediately usher in the reign of Jesus here on earth. Bible passages point instead to a poignant period of time where the frantic cacophony of world rebellion is absolutely stilled . . . there is not one single person left on the entire planet.

A Journey Through the Stars. Jesus gave His solemn word: “In My Father’s house [heaven] are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also (John 14:2, 3). Paul writes with fervent joy about the Second Coming and resurrection of the saved, then adds: After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Revelation describes a time period in heaven where all the saved will reign with Christ a thousand years (20:4).

As explored earlier, Jesus will not return to earth without a careful, generous judgment regarding who wants to be saved in heaven and who rejects the offer. At the Second Coming, every case will have been decided. How, then, do human beings — redeemed sinners — sit on heavenly thrones of judgment? Do you not know, Paul writes, that the saints will judge the world? Do you not know that we will judge angels?(1 Corinthians 6:2, 3). When Revelation uses the metaphor of great books being opened, it symbolizes God’s openness in allowing the human race to query Him, to hear His explanation about the cosmic dilemma of sin and how the Godhead has labored to save as many as possible.

An American governor recently found himself facing accusations of wrongdoing. His constituents didn't understand his actions; his motives were under fire. So he did the only possible thing. Calling a press conference, he stood in one place for one hour and 49 minutes, answering questions, explaining his motives and movements, using 19,000 words to try to satisfy the hearts of those who didn't know whether they could still trust him. In somewhat the same way, God will graciously allow His own creation to look at the full record of human betrayal, of spurned offers, of secret disloyalties. Someone we might have expected to be an honored citizen of the New Jerusalem will have turned out to be — behind closed doors — a bitter opponent of Christ, or a disinterested hypocrite.

During the Millennium, Where Are Those Who Did Not Choose Salvation? Throughout the centuries of our planet's unfolding history, many lost people have already gone down to their graves. When the trumpet sounds and Jesus appears in the clouds, these disaffected sinners do not stir. The Bible says frankly: The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended (Revelation 20:5). John adds, referring to those believers who joyfully do come out of their graves: This is the first resurrection.

Will many non-saved people witness the arrival of Jesus? Yes, and it will be a terrifying experience as they realize their tragic mistake. They bet on atheism, or on selfishness, or on some human leader's empty political promises . . . and now Jesus Christ is indeed a resurrected Savior, prepared to rule an eternal kingdom they can never enter. Paul writes about how the brightness of Jesus' coming will actually destroy rebels (2 Thessalonians 2:8); in Revelation 6, people who have spurned the Calvary gift will be so overwhelmed with dizzying sadness they will call on the rocks of upheaval to fall on them.

If those in the saved camp have all been rescued and are blissfully worshiping in heaven, and those who have rejected Jesus are either long dead or newly expired . . . who, then, is left on earth? No one. Picture an empty, ravaged, plague-scarred world where there is nothing but stillness and the gloom of cemeteries. The freeways and factories are empty; cities are depopulated. The only whisper of life on earth is that belonging to Lucifer and his fallen army of angels. Revelation borrows the metaphor of a bottomless pit (20:2, 3) to describe the vast emptiness of Satan's domain; he is essentially imprisoned by the reality that his agenda is defeated and his human quarry forever beyond his reach.

Execution. As the millennium ends, God's city of Jerusalem actually descends to earth (21:2), and for a brief time the vast, angry coalition of those who chose to be left out of heaven return to life — the second resurrection (20:5). Incited by Lucifer, this still angry mob advances in a futile assault (v. 9) against a holy city and a wondrous eternity they could have received as a free gift. Only then, as their permanent estrangement is vividly plain, does an anguishing God employ His

“strange act” (Isaiah 28:21), bringing the rebellion of sin to an end. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.

Does Hell Last Forever? It is a common Christian doctrine that hellfire is a place of eternal torment and that sinners go there immediately upon death. However, Revelation is clear that punishment does not occur until this one terrible, cleansing moment at the conclusion of the millennium. But does the torment of being destroyed continue for many more centuries? A common theological abbreviation — ECT — suggests eternal conscious torment. But the totality of Scripture’s witness strongly suggests an entirely different picture of God’s justice.

1. Destruction, Not Preservation in Endless Flames. Revelation says that sin and sinners will be “destroyed”; Romans 6:23 calls the wages of sin death, not eternal conscious life in hell. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus Himself declared that the soul is not indestructible, that His Father could destroy both body and soul in hell. Peter describes earthly elements utterly destroyed by fire, laid bare. Metaphors paint a picture of utter annihilation, of sinners being burned up like chaff.

2. “Forever” Has a Human Limitation. In biblical language, *aionios* definitely means forever, everlasting, whenever referencing God. But when applied to the human family, it simply means as long as life shall last. Slaves were to serve their masters “forever”; the child Samuel served Eli in the temple “forever”; even Jonah spent what surely felt like “forever” — only three days — in a great fish’s belly. And when the Bible speaks of unquenchable fire, it simply describes a divine power that is beyond human powers to extinguish, but which goes out when the flames have consumed their target. Rebel cities like Sodom and Gomorrah are said to have suffered the punishment of eternal fire, but those flames died down many centuries ago.

A growing group of Christians and Bible scholars are prayerfully seeking a new understanding of how God will act to completely heal the universe of sin rather than coexist with an eternally burning lake of fire where sinners can never die. John Stott and Clark Pinnock, both leading evangelical theologians until their recent deaths, were leaders in supporting the Bible model of annihilation, where the punishment is everlasting, not the punishing. Loss of heaven itself, and being forever shut out from the joy of fellowship with Jesus, is sufficient penalty; a sinner need not be eternally tormented and conscious in order to be justly punished.

The reality is that the community of faith cannot fully resolve this question. God is loving and fair; whatever He chooses to do will be in harmony with His holy compassion and His determine that a new heaven and a new earth will be a secure kingdom and wonderful home for us. It’s also good news that each of us can be saved; God eagerly reaches out to bring each of us into His eternal family.