

ABSTRACT

Inevitabilism: Hope for the Salvation of All

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In this thesis, I establish an argument that a subset of free will universalism I call “Inevitabilism” is the best orthodox Christian response to the problem of hell from a biblical and philosophical perspective, and defend the thesis against the philosophical objections of Eleonore Stump, Jerry Walls, and Zach Manis.

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INEVITABILISM:
HOPE FOR THE SALVATION OF ALL

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INTRODUCTION

A Hope for Universal Salvation

The nature of hope entails believing that the object of that hope is possible. You cannot hope that the Yankees will win the Stanley Cup, because the Yankees are not a hockey team. But an American can hope that her first-born child will become President of the United States, despite the odds against her. In a theological context, believing that the object of hope is possible entails believing that it is not authoritatively taught, by Scripture, church teachings, or another relevant source of authority, that the object of hope is not possible. A Christian cannot hope that there is a secondary deity, because the Christian faith teaches there is only one God. But within Christian liturgy, we are taught to hope for and pray for the salvation of all people.¹ You cannot hope that all are saved while believing that it is authoritatively taught that not all are saved. To do so is a contradiction: believing in the possibility that all are saved inherently involves the rejection of the belief that it is authoritatively taught otherwise, if authoritative teachings are taken to be true. There are very few who seem to hope universalism is not true--thus, these people must concede either that the practice of the church is wrong and that the loving hope they hold is ill-founded, or that universal salvation is possible and therefore that it is not authoritatively taught that some are inescapably damned. For universal salvation to be possible, there must be either a paternalistic instinct within God to simply

¹ The Universal Prayer present in the Catholic Mass is one such example, replicated throughout other Christian traditions. See the *General Instructions of the Roman Missal*, section 69. Each chapter of this work will begin with another example from across the Christian tradition.

save all people or for God never to stop pursuing sinners until they accept redemption. Due to our free will, I am prone to believe the latter possibility. This thesis seeks to establish that it is not authoritatively taught, either Biblically or philosophically, that universal salvation is not true, and thus give reason for the hope which we are taught to hold.

You would be hard-pressed to find a serious Christian philosopher or theologian who does not wish for the salvation of all people or the ultimate victory of Christ over death through the redemption of all creation. This work is not meant to push someone toward that wish, for that is the job of the Holy Spirit. This work is instead for those who say, “I wish all could be saved, *but* there are considerations that cause me to withhold belief.” These considerations are usually taken to be grounded in the Bible or philosophy that arises therein. I will confess that many popular versions of universalism attempt to simply deny or reject both the Bible and orthodoxy. This work, however, does not. The arguments I am making here lie within the realm of a deep commitment to the Scriptures and to the faith as it has been handed down to us. This thesis is an attempt at doing the work of biblically-informed philosophy to establish that universal salvation is a legitimate option for serious Christians. A biblically-informed philosophical venture takes the Scriptures as its boundaries, and attempts to discuss hermeneutics of the text in a philosophical manner. Such an examination of the Scriptures shows that there is a definitive theme of damnation running throughout the Bible. But as I will show in Chapter 2, there is also a definitive theme of universal salvation. Some choose to ignore one of those themes in favor of the other, while this work, due to its engagement in biblically-informed philosophy, attempts to understand how both could be held to be true.

The framework of biblically-informed philosophy also limits the boundaries of what I will discuss in this thesis. My focus here is only to deal with the biblical and philosophical objections to one particular version of universal salvation that will be discussed below. I acknowledge that there are other considerations to take into account. Objections raised by practical theology, missiology, and the tradition of the Church are all legitimate concerns that deserve reflection, but they are concerns that can only be dealt with after a biblically-informed philosophical base is established. Dealing with these secondary concerns is not what this thesis sets out to do. I intend here only to show that it is not authoritatively taught by the Bible or through biblically-informed philosophy that universal salvation is not true, and from this basis, I hope the conversation can continue.

I distinguish between my view of universal salvation and others by referring to my position as “Inevitable Divine Victory through Christ,” or “Inevitabilism.” The central thesis of this view is that 1) God is free to 2) and wills to continue to 3) pursue lost souls 4) in a real hell 5) until all freely accept 6) the free gift of salvation 7) through Jesus Christ our Lord. Clause 1 articulates that God is free to do what God wants to do. There is nothing that can outmaneuver God in such a way as to prevent God from accomplishing those goals. If God wants to do something, then God will do it. Clause 2 articulates that God wants to save all people. The Scripture abounds with texts that teach as much, and the witness of the church to the mercy of God reinforces this conclusion. Clause 1 and 2 taken together mean that God can and will bring all to redemption. Clause 3 recognizes that some lost souls might not easily come to repentance. When we all see God’s glory at judgment day, then I believe it would be difficult to reject God’s free gift

of salvation. However, there are possible motivations that would cause a sinner to choose hell over heaven, and thus God will need to pursue that sinner in order to accomplish God's purpose. Clause 4 articulates the biblical witness that there is a real, physical, and spatially-located hell in which those sinners who reject God will suffer. Hell is a place to be feared and avoided, which reinforces Clause 2 that God would not will any of God's beloved creatures to experience it for long. Clause 5 articulates that God cannot override the lost's free will rejection of heaven, because to do so would be to delegitimize the sinner's potential love for God. God must respect free will, but can act in such a way as to ensure that both free will is protected and universal salvation is accomplished. Clause 6 emphasizes that salvation is a free gift provided by God for all people. No one merits heaven because of who we are, but God gives the gift of heaven because of who God is. Clause 6 also works with Clause 5 to say that salvation is a gift that must be freely accepted by the individual in order for that person to obtain redemption. Clause 7 expresses that the free gift of salvation comes only through the atonement provided by the work and Incarnation of Jesus Christ. It is in this Incarnation that the love of God that motivates Clause 1 is made visible. All of these clauses together articulate a very specific subset of universalism called Inevitabilism, which is what this thesis seeks to establish. This work is ultimately committed to proving to the orthodox and loving Christian that there is space in the faith to hold a version of universalism like Inevitabilism to be true, moving the idea of universal salvation from wish to hope.

This thesis attempts to do two things: first, lay the groundwork for believing that Inevitabilism is potentially possible, and then from that foundation arguing that God has the ability to make Inevitabilism hold true. Chapter 1 will explain the necessity for an

alternative to a common conception of hell which creates serious problems for Christianity. The chapter will go on to outline several options, and settle on Inevitabilism as the task of this work. Chapter 2 will establish the biblical tension between passages of Scripture that teach the doctrine of hell and the universal salvation. The chapter will go on to suggest a method by which neither sets of passages are ignored through the possibility of post-mortem chances to accept Christ's free gift of salvation. Chapter 3 will examine a biblical argument and the problem of ignorance of salvation as reasons to hold that God will offer sinners post-mortem chances to accept salvation. The first half of the work will thus establish the motivation for an alternative to this common conception of hell, biblical reasons to holding to the particular alternative of Inevitabilism, and the method by which Inevitabilism is possible. The second half of this thesis will then turn to defending the idea that God can bring all to salvation. In Chapter 4, I will engage with Jerry Walls and argue that God can outmaneuver the decisions of human beings without violating their free will. In Chapter 5, I will engage with Eleonore Stump and argue that God could redeem the character of those who reject God until they are capable of and do choosing God. In Chapter 6, I will engage with Zach Manis and argue that God is a God capable of doing anything in order to bring about universal salvation. With these major objections answered, I hope that this thesis will move its skeptical readers from utter rejection to lesser doubts, and its receptive readers from wish to hope for the redemption of all humanity.

CHAPTER 1

A Hell of a Problem

*Thou didst descend into hell, O my Savior, shattering its gates as almighty;
resurrecting the dead as Creator, and destroying the sting of death.*

*Thou hast delivered Adam from the curse, O Lover of Man,
and we all cry to Thee: "O Lord, save us!"*

Resurrection Kontak, Tone 5,
Eastern Orthodox Church

The problem of evil is the greatest objection against the existence of a good and all-powerful God. Various theodicies exist in an attempt to explain away the problem of evil, the strongest of which claims that evil exists because God has given human beings free will in order that humans may truly love God and one another. This argument is based on an evaluative scale by which God has determined that the greater good of true love outweighs the suffering of human beings. But the greatest objection to this sort of theodicy is to then point to the traditional concept of hell within Christianity. Thus, the greatest objection to Christianity is found within its own doctrines. If God is good, how could God send anyone to hell? In this chapter, I will attempt to elucidate this argument, and then outline how this work attempts to respond to the problem of hell through Inevitabilism.

The Problem of Evil

Within the debate over the existence of God, one particular argument stands out as the strongest objection to theism: the problem of evil.² The objection asks how a good

² John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 3-6ff. See also Augustine, *Enchiridion*; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3; and J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 64, No. 254. (Apr., 1955), pp. 200-212.

God who is all-powerful could allow such horrendous evils as cancer and the Holocaust to occur. A good God who is all-powerful, goes the argument, could (due to God's power) and would (due to God's goodness) prevent evils from occurring.³ But these evils do occur. Therefore, the argument concludes, there cannot be a good God who is all-powerful. Therefore, the existence of evils seems to disprove the possibility of any all-powerful and all-good God such as the one taught in the Bible. The problem of evil claims that the Christian God and evil cannot coexist.

A traditional theodicy states that there is a good so great, namely the freely chosen love of human beings, that God would allow some evils to exist in order to make freely chosen love logically possible. First, we must recognize that God is free to do whatever God wants to do. But, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, God has created a universe that follows logical laws, such as the law of gravity and the law of noncontradiction. God's decision to create and sustain such a logical existence necessarily limits how God can interact with the world. God limits God's own power so that God can do anything *logically possible* but not *possible qua omnipotence*. By this I simply mean that an omnipotent God hypothetically (in a universe not governed by our logical laws) could create a situation where the chair I sit in at this moment both exists and does not exist. But in our reality, which *is* governed by logical laws, God has limited God's power so as to only be able to do what is logically possible. Second, we must recognize that this limitedness forces God to choose between goods. There are occasionally good states that cannot coexist, such as Joe's lifelong monogamous marriage

³ Thomas Talbott, *The Inescapable Love of God* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 6. See also Hicks, *Evil*, 5.

to either Kathryn or Taylor. Joe can be happily married to either one, but doing so necessarily negates the possibility of the other. Likewise, there are some good states, like winning a game, that necessarily entail a bad state, like losing a game. As Richard Swinburne explains, “not even God who can do anything logically possible can bring about both of two incompatible good states; or a good state without the bad state, when the good state entails the bad state.”⁴ God must therefore choose between certain good states. Creaturely moral goodness seems to be one such good state that God has chosen. But the possibility of creaturely goodness also entails the possibility of evil. As Alvin Plantinga explains, “To create creatures capable of *moral good*... [God] must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can’t give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so.”⁵ In order for free will to exist, there must be both a good and an evil option. Thus, free will necessitates that there is the possibility of evil in the world, and Christian theism only needs to recognize that that possibility has been actualized.

One might object that the category of creaturely moral goodness does not seem to warrant the incredible evils that we see in the world. But Swinburne argues that in order for humans to be capable of loving God in a full way, we must have the possibility of rejecting God.

It is good that the free choice or whether to make such a loving response to God should be a serious one: that we love God, not as robots programmed to do so, but as free agents who have chosen to do so because they have seen how good God is... Hence without the possibility of moral evil resulting, not merely will humans be deprived of the great good of a free choice between good and bad as such, they will be deprived of the possibility of loving God in a very full way. But, if

⁴ Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 126.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 30.

someone is to have the opportunity to choose... whether to give you his love, he must also have the opportunity to hurt you instead.⁶

In the case of a perfectly good being, hurting God means committing an evil act. Thus, the good of freely chosen love requires the capacity of human beings to choose evil, and thus evil must exist in the world. True love, according to this theodicy, requires that a creature be capable of freely making the morally good choice to love God, which in turn requires the possibility of choosing otherwise. The good state of true love of God thus entails the evil that some would point to in order to disprove the existence of God.

The Problem of Hell

The problem of hell is that the doctrines of Christianity contain a great evil. What I will call the evangelical doctrine of hell has four central tenets: 1) hell is populated, 2) hell is eternal, 3) hell is a punishment, and 4) hell is inescapable.⁷ In a single sentence: there are some people who will forever be punished and cannot escape. This sentence alone creates a serious problem for any theodicy. This doctrine of hell claims that no matter the good or bad one might have done or experienced in this life, an everlasting punishment is to follow for anyone who missed out or rejected the free gift of salvation. A few years of life on earth, even if they were lived to the fullest extent possible for a human being, seem to pale in comparison to an eternity of suffering. Under this vision of hell, it would have been better for the damned had they never been born at all. This eternal suffering also seems to serve no greater purpose for the damned. Sinners simply suffer forever, without any greater good coming to them. This version of hell posits as

⁶ Swinburne, *Providence*, 195.

⁷ Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25.

central to the Christian faith that there is an evil awaiting the damned such that it would have been better had the sinner never lived and that seems to serve no cogent greater purpose. Thus, the doctrine of hell seems to posit an evil so terrible that it makes our previous theodicy fall apart.

In order to more fully understand the problem of the evils of hell, we must first examine the various kinds of evil. There are two different categories of evils: necessary or unnecessary and mundane or horrendous. The necessity of evil returns our conversation to the earlier theodicy. In discussions of logic, a necessity is a thing, circumstance, or occurrence that must exist in order to bring about some other thing, circumstance, or occurrence. If there is only one way for a particular end to be brought about, then the condition that must be so is necessary to the existence of that particular end. If the only circumstance in which I would read a John Grisham novel is if I am flying from Waco to Dallas, then it is necessary to my having read a John Grisham novel that I was flying from Waco to Dallas. The evils that are logically necessary for bringing about a greater good are called “necessary evils.”⁸ The good state of someone winning a game logically requires the bad state of someone losing a game--but the evidence that winning games is a greater good comes from the fact that we keep playing them. “Unnecessary evils,” on the other hand, are of the kind that their existence is not logically necessary to bring about some greater good.⁹ Mocking someone is an example of an

⁸ Nelson Pike, “Hume on Evil,” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 72, no. 2 (April, 1963), 188-192. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2183103>.

⁹ William L. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4 (October, 1979), 335-336. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009775>.

unnecessary evil; there is no greater good for which mocking exists. Necessary and unnecessary evils make up the first categorization of evils.

But there is another category by which we must examine evils, and that is the depth of damage to which they wreak upon their participants. Marilyn McCord Adams defines horrendous evils as “evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole.”¹⁰ In short, horrendous evils are evils of the kind that for the agent who experiences one it would have been better had if they had never been born.¹¹ Horrendous evils can be contrasted with mundane evils, or evils which do not do so much damage as to make life never have been worth living. It is possible to say in a theodicy that God will allow for some mundane unnecessary evils (either from our subjective perspective or objectively), but that God’s goodness will prevent all horrendous evils from occurring. However, it is also possible that there are some horrendous evils that God allows, if for example, they are necessary for bringing about a greater good. These two categorizations of evils thus capture all possible evils.

Thus, for someone who would want to maximize the amount of evil logically possible, God could allow for horrendous necessary evils, mundane necessary evils, and mundane unnecessary evils, but could not allow horrendous unnecessary evils. If God is

¹⁰ Marilyn McCord Adams and Stewart Sutherland, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 63 (1989): 299. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4106922>.

¹¹ A definition this strict does not appear to me to be actually sufficient to prove the existence of a good God, but it is the highest possible bar that any defense of hell would have to overcome, and thus must be dealt with here.

in any meaningful sense good, then God could not allow for horrendous unnecessary evil. The problem of hell is that it appears to be a horrendous unnecessary evil.

God cannot co-exist with a horrendous unnecessary evil like the evangelical conception of hell. Thus, there are a number of methods to try and avoid this conception. First, there are two paternalistic options; second, annihilationism; third, mild hell; and fourth, free-will universalism. I will quickly explain a few of the positions here, and then set them aside to argue in favor of a subset of free-will universalism I call Inevitabilism.

		Is the evil mundane?	
		Yes	No
Is the evil necessary?	Yes	Necessary Mundane Evils	Necessary Horrendous Evils
	No	Unnecessary Mundane Evils	Unnecessary Horrendous Evils

Possible Alternatives

First, there are two paternalistic options. The first is what I will call “paternalistic damnation,” in which sinners are simply damned to hell due to the decision of God. I must confess that I cannot understand how anyone can defend this view, but David Alexander and Daniel Johnson come closest in the book *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*. The second option is what I will call “paternalistic universalism,” in which sinners are simply saved due to the decision of God. Although I think he would deny it, Thomas Talbott’s argument in *The Inescapable Love of God* boils down to a defense of this view. This view functionally denies the first premise of the evangelical concept of hell, that hell is populated. In my opinion, both of these paternalistic options pose a serious difficulty

with regard to the problem of evil, and thus I will set them aside as possibilities for dealing with the problem of hell.

Annihilationism ought to be dismissed for a similar reason. Annihilationism is the view that the damned will not suffer eternal torment, but instead will one day be annihilated by the fires of hell. Hell is not an infinite evil under this view, but only lasts for a little while. This view thus denies the second premise of the evangelical concept of hell, that hell is eternal. But again, this seems to me an even greater evil than infinite punishment, because to remove being entirely from a human being means to remove all that is good about one of God's creation. In this action, it seems that God is actively *creating* evil by eradicating the good God has already created. This view seems to only reinforce the problem of evil, and thus I will also set annihilationism aside as a possibility for dealing with the problem of hell.

The third option is to deny that hell is a punishment. Jerry Walls, Eleonore Stump, Zachary Manis, and a host of other modern philosophical defenders of hell rest on this view. Swinburne puts it simply: "for God to subject [sinners] to literally *endless* physical pain... does seem to me to be incompatible with the goodness of God."¹² Most modern philosophers seem to echo this concern, and thus cling to a mild view of hell. This response spans a wide spectrum, from those who deny that hell is pain at all to those who say that it is pain, but that that pain is self-inflicted and a natural consequence of their sin.¹³ Unlike paternalism and annihilationism, there is nothing contradictory with holding

¹² Richard Swinburne, "A Theodicy of Heaven and Hell," in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. by Alfred J. Freddoso (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 51.

¹³ Here I must reveal my hesitance to call the evangelical view either the "strong" view or the "traditional" view, as some other universalists do. A belief in this type of hell has been one of the clearest signs of an evangelical church in modern America. But it is not evident to me that either the majority of evidence supports this view of hell (thus, eliminating the possibility of referring to this as the "strong"

to both free will universalism and a mild view of hell. However, most of the strongest critiques of free will universalism come from those who hold a mild view of hell and want to hold out hope for free will universalism, but fear for philosophical or biblical reasons that they cannot. Thus, the mild view of hell will serve as our greatest foil in defending the possibility of free will universalism.

The final option to avoid the evangelical view of hell is to deny that hell is inescapable. This view is what I will call, “free will universalism,” and within its wide range, I will limit the scope of this paper to a specific line of argument I will call “Inevitabilism.” Inevitabilism is simply the view that God wills to and can continue to pursue lost sinners in a real and physical hell until all accept the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. In Chapter 2, we will examine biblical reasons to think that God does not wish hell to be the final destination of any of God’s creatures. In Chapter 3, we will examine common theological reasons to think that God would continue to offer the possibility of salvation after death. These ideas simply build on arguments made by the great defender of free will universalism, Keith DeRose, in his article, “Universalism and the Bible: The *Really* Good News.” Once these ideas are established, the real work I am doing is to defend Inevitabilism from the critique that God could not bring all sinners to redemption, which will be done in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Through this method, I hope to establish Inevitabilism as a viable option for answering the problem of hell in Christianity through biblically-inspired philosophy.

view), nor does it seem to be held that hell is anything more than a natural consequence of sin the works of great thinkers from Barth to Aquinas to Augustine. I could be wrong--but I have decided not to enter into that debate here, and instead err of the side of identifying this view with its clearest modern adherents.

Behind the denial of either the premise that hell is not a punishment or that hell is not inescapable is an implicit question: why would a loving God create a place separate from God's self for some people? The answer of both of these options is to say that God created hell as an act of love. There are two different ways of saying this; the first claims that God created hell as a place for those who reject God to 'get what they want,' and the second claims that God created hell as a temporary place so that God can continue to pursue a restored relationship with each individual person. Under these models, hell is not seen as intentionally a punishment, intentionally populated, or intentionally inescapable. Instead, hell is all of these things in practice because of the individual choices of the sinner. The key difference between the two is that the mild hell view holds that hell will always be populated, while Inevitabilism holds that given enough time, God will draw all sinners to a restored relationship.

The purpose of this work is to establish the foundation for belief in Inevitabilism. It is my thesis that, given the possibility of post-mortem chances and God's desire for a relationship based on individual free will, God's subjugation of all wills under God's will, and God's ability to work together all things to accomplish God's will, that all will be redeemed. The view that inevitably, given enough time, that all people will eventually choose of their free will salvation through Christ and escape from hell, I call Inevitabilism.

CHAPTER 2

Unbounded Grace

*There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty.
...But we make God's love too narrow by false limits of our own
And we magnify God's strictness with a zeal God will not own.
For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind...
If our love were but more simple, we could take God at God's word.*

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy,
Frederick W. Faber

In Chapter 1, we examined the problem of hell as it relates to the goodness of God. We looked at different methods of answering hell as a horrendous unnecessary evil, and focused our discussion in on two interpretations of the notion of hell as an act of love: Mild Hell and Inevitabilism. The key difference between these two answers is that while Mild Hell holds that hell will always be populated, Inevitabilism holds that due to who God is, all in hell will eventually accept the free gift of salvation. Advocates of the Mild Hell view hold their position in part due to the biblical witness that seems to teach about an eternal hell. This thesis is a work of biblically-inspired philosophy, and to do biblically-inspired philosophy, we must explore the biblical texts in order to inform our view. This chapter will be devoted to examining the texts to see if there really is a conflict between the biblical teaching on hell and Inevitabilism.

The Bible sets up two rival visions of the afterlife: one clear vision of hell, and one clear vision of universalism. In this chapter, I will present some of the strongest verses that seem to teach universal salvation. These verses are typically dismissed by an objection that when they use the term “all,” there is an implicit limitation on the term that must be read into it by the New Testament’s teaching on hell. In this case, there would

develop a battle of Scripture against Scripture, which demands a distinction. I will attempt to overcome the apparent contradiction between the two rival themes of an eternal hell and universal salvation by properly understanding the etymology, lexicography, and usage of the term *aion* and *aionas* as referring to an indefinite duration of time. By appealing to the original use of the terms, this chapter will prove that the Bible does not authoritatively teach that universalism is not true, and may in fact seem to teach the opposite.

The Biblical Message of Universal Salvation

While there are some who believe that the Scripture does not teach universalism,¹⁴ there are about seventeen strong declarations of universal salvation in the New Testament. Once you accept the teaching of these verses, the Scripture comes alive with the doctrine. There are at least sixty additional verses that universalists from the early church to the modern day have used to teach the restoration of all things unto God, which are in turn reinforced by verses about more general redemption, God's character of love, and an understanding of justice as mercy (rather than acting as its contradiction). For the purpose of this work, however, we will focus on just a few of the stronger declarations.

I will argue that the overall witness of Scripture seems to teach universal salvation. In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul declares, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all

¹⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, "Universalism and The Reality of Eternal Punishment: The Biblical Basis of the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment," preached January 29, 1990, Desiring God, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/universalism-and-the-reality-of-eternal-punishment-the-biblical-basis-of-the-doctrine-of-eternal-punishment>.

will be made alive.”¹⁵ Adam’s sin has a totalizing effect that covers all of humanity. Jesus serves as the juxtaposition, the source of life that will one day likewise cover all. Romans 5:18-19 reinforces this same point, that “as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” and “by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” It even appears in Romans 11:32 that God purposefully allowed Adam to sin and thus all humans to be born into a world of sin “so that he may have mercy on them all.” In the book of John, Jesus prays to God the Father that he might glorify the Son, “since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.” In the first clause, the Father gives all humans to Jesus, and then Jesus is to give eternal life to all he has been given. Christ therefore envisions his own ministry as saving all people. The Apostle John echoes this idea in 1 John 2:2, teaching that Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” From these verses, it seems that Christ’s death on the cross is meant to save all people.

Paul’s theology of Christ’s victory over all seems to support this reading. In Romans 10:9, Paul teaches that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord... [then] you will be saved.” Here, Paul sets up the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord as a necessary and sufficient condition for salvation. Paul might as well plug it into the formula, “If C, then S.” ‘C’ cannot be true and ‘S’ false; for confession to take place without the confessor’s result in salvation would be to make Paul’s statement logically invalid. Put another way: either you confess Jesus is Lord or you will not be saved. By

¹⁵ All Scripture references will be from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

logical deduction, if it is true that you confess, then it cannot be true that you will not be saved. Paul affirms this logic in 1 Corinthians 12:3, where he explains that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.” Likewise, it cannot be both that you confess Jesus is Lord and that you do not have the Holy Spirit working in you. Either you confess that Jesus is Lord or the Holy Spirit is not in you. If the Holy Spirit is not in you, then you cannot confess that Jesus is Lord, or “If not H, then not C.” The Holy Spirit thus proves the efficacy of the confession. Any question as to the sufficiency of this confession is answered by Paul’s assertion that wherever those words are spoken, the Holy Spirit is at work to help the individual confessor. In these verses, Paul sets up two necessary and sufficient relationships. First, the Holy Spirit is necessary and sufficient to make a confession that Jesus is Lord, and second, a confession that Jesus is Lord is necessary and sufficient to obtaining the free gift of salvation. Paul then continues by declaring in Philippians 2:10-11 “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.” Paul teaches that every person who has ever lived will prove C true, which means it cannot be that not H or not S. One cannot confess without the Holy Spirit, and one cannot confess without obtaining the free gift of salvation. Thus, Paul seems to definitively teach a doctrine of universal salvation.

The witness of Scripture also supports that God’s will is for the redemption of all people. The Apostle Peter gives us reason to believe that universal salvation is God’s will in 2 Peter 3:9, for the “Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” Paul believes that God wills all to come to redemption by saying in 1

Timothy 2:3-4 that this idea “is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” If God wills a thing, and God is free to bring about all that God wills, then that thing will be as God wills it.¹⁶ Thus the Biblical case, from the words of Saint Paul, the Apostle John, the Apostle Peter, and Jesus Christ himself, seem to lend a deep strength to the position that eventually, from the nature of Christ’s sacrifice and by the will of God, all people will be saved.

The core of this debate rests on attempting to understand these seventeen verses in light of five that seem to teach eternal torment, rather than the other way around. One of the advantages of the Inevitabilist case is that it does not deny the existence of hell, that it is a place of torment, or that some will live there. Inevitabilism only needs to deny that it is inescapable. Those proof texts used against universalism, to which we will turn shortly, establish a hell that seems at best incongruent with the rest of the Christian story. God’s eventual victory over evil would be at best incomplete if evil is allowed its own kingdom in which God’s will for some of God’s creation will be thwarted for all eternity. As Robin Parry puts it, “Universalists believe that the ending in which God redeems his whole creation makes the most sense of the biblical metanarrative. Traditionalists disagree.”¹⁷ These seventeen verses alone give a significant reason to believe in universal salvation, but the broader nature of God as presented through Christ gives reason to believe that universal salvation is the only way a God of love’s will is sovereign and will truly have victory.

¹⁶ Proverbs 21:30; Deuteronomy 11:25; Romans 8:31; 1 John 4:4; Psalm 56:11; John 10:28-30; 1 Samuel 14:6.

¹⁷ Robin Parry, “Bell’s Hells: Seven Myths about Universalists,” *Baptist Times*, published 17 March, 2017, last accessed 24 June, 2017. No longer available on Baptist Times website. <http://www.baptisttimes.co.uk/bellshells.htm>.

The Meaning of “All”

The most common objection to this metanarrative argument, however, comes from the limited proof texts in favor of eternal damnation that cause the objectors to challenge the nature of the universalist verses. This objection is generally oriented around the idea of the word, “all.” The objection claims that in cases in which Paul or John or Peter or Jesus says, “all,” they actually reference some restricted and undesignated secondary referential set. The strongest case comes in the example of Jesus’ own words, when he declares in one clause that God has given him authority over all people, and in the second when he says he is to give eternal life to all given to him. The verse could be read as describing two different groups, one given to Christ as under his authority, and one given to him in some second, special way.¹⁸ The objection attempts to extrapolate from an instance like this one to every other case. This argument claims that although all have sinned through Adam, some secondary set of “all” will be redeemed through Christ, and that though all are condemned by that same man, only that select “all” will gain salvation.

Important to this distinction is a proper interpretation of the term, “all.” All means all in totality. All must be defined so that there is no part of any set to which ‘all’ refers that does not fall under the referential term, ‘all.’ If I ask whether all of the candy is gone, I ask whether every single piece is gone, not whether all but the green candies are gone. As Keith DeRose explains, “‘all’, when it’s used properly, always means all without exception.”¹⁹ Exceptions are contextually possible, however, but typically requires

¹⁸ The problem with this interpretation is rather obviously that the verse does not actually say it, but we will put that to the side.

¹⁹ Keith DeRose, “Universalism and the Bible: The Really Good News,” last accessed October 08, 2017, <http://campuspress.yale.edu/keithderose/1129-2/>.

explicit mention, such as when God promises to give all of Israel to Abraham's descendants.²⁰ But to add exceptions where not explicitly mentioned is to add to the Scriptures in a contracting manner, restricting the text from speaking what it actually intends to say. On the other hand, critics of universalism argue, there could be an implied implicit restriction. However, DeRose points out that "it would have been especially misleading or even incompetent for Paul to mean something less than the whole human race" in verses that use the same term in two separate clauses with vastly different meanings. Thus, there seems to be neither an explicit or implicit limitation placed on "all" from the text itself. Even if Christ's statement is taken to refer to two separate groups, that fact cannot be extrapolated to every verse in which God wills or promises salvation for the whole world. All must be understood as meaning the totality of a given set, in this case human beings, and thus, must be dealt with as a passage promising the salvation of all human beings.

Possible Implicit Limitations

There is no immediate limitation present in the verses, but there could be an implicit limitation from the broader context of Scripture. In order to do so, an implicit limitation should meet at least one basic criteria in order to be considered a death-blow to these seventeen universalistic passages: there must be an explicit contradiction between the two readings of Scripture.²¹ Again, inevitabilism needs to deny only the

²⁰ Genesis 13:15.

²¹ In truth, a test of this sort should have a plethora of other criteria. The following are only a few: First, we should of course ask if there are any obvious contradictions in the theory itself, which is largely the work of the rest of this thesis. Second, we must question if there are any passages of Scripture that stand in contradiction to the theory and supporting verses. Third, we must evaluate whether or not the text under

inescapability thesis of the evangelical conception of hell. Inevitabilism only needs to prove that hell is not inescapable. Scripture that discusses the existence of hell is not in conflict with Inevitabilism. Likewise, Scripture that discusses damnation generally as a torment stands more in conflict with modern philosophical defenders of a mild hell such as Eleonore Stump or Richard Swinburne, rather than Inevitabilism. This particular thesis will not venture into the larger question of whether or not non-human entities will be saved, further limiting our scope. There are five passages and one parable that could potentially cause a problem for Inevitabilism by limiting the scope of the term, “all”: Matthew 18:8, 25:41, 46; Mark 9:47-48; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9.

I will begin this discussion by setting aside three of the five problematic passages. In Mark 9, Jesus is discussing the punishment awaiting sinners, particularly those that cause sin. He says that it would be better to be cast into the sea with a heavy stone around the neck than to go to hell. Christ recommends cutting off sinful feet or hands and gouging out sinful eyes rather than facing damnation. In verse 48, hell is described as a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” But the never-ending aspect of the verse is the fire, which is permanent. The act of punishment itself is not described as endless, only the source of the punishment.

On the other hand, Matthew 25 describes an eternal fire in both verses 41 and 46 to which the goats who did not obey Jesus are cast into hell. But this passage is difficult to take literally for anyone who would argue that salvation is by grace and not by

review has the theological question we are considering as its main focus, or if it mentions it simply in passing and thus does not give a full picture.

works.²² The goats who are damned claim to know Jesus and to have pretended to live Christian lives, but are still damned for failing to carry out Christ-like works for the poor, naked, hungry, and thirsty. To base opposition to universalism on this position is to accept the necessity of works as part of salvation, which most Protestants are unwilling to do, and a position with which most universalists would concur. As Parry says, “Universalists do not have a low view of sin, they have a high view of grace: ‘Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.’”²³ Due to the theological tenuousness of these three pieces of evidence for a broader implicit limitation on the passages in favor of universalism, we will set these Matthean and Markian passages aside.

The remaining two verses are more difficult, until you begin to understand the context of the word translated in our Bibles as “eternal.” Matthew 18:8 is the Matthean account of the earlier passage from Mark, and here Jesus says, “It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.” 2 Thessalonians is written to those suffering persecution, and in a vengeful tone, Paul tells them in 1:8-9 that Jesus will return, “in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” Both of these passages could be answered in the same manner as the previous verses by saying, that the “eternal” therein refers to the nature of the location, rather than the condition of the sinner. Furthermore, none of these

²² All other parabolic references to hell suffer the same flaws as Matthew 25; they are parables, meant to convey a deeper meaning, wherein the particulars of the story are not literally true. In addition, none of the other parables explicitly posits anything that contradicts Inevitabilism.

²³ Parry, “Bell’s Hells.”

passages have the nature of hell as their purpose. The word “eternal” is used to describe the severity of punishment as used as a teaching tool, not the subject of the lesson itself. Even if the eternality of the punishment was specifically in reference to the condition of the sinner, it would be difficult to see if this is in fact a metaphor used to illuminate the actual teaching. However, let us suppose that it is clear that the word “eternal” was specifically taught in reference to hell, and now we will instead seek to understand how the word “eternal” changes the situation of the damned.

Never-Ending or Age-Enduring?

Through an examination of the etymology, lexicography, and usage of the term, we can better understand the intentions of the authors in using the word, “eternal.” The Greek word translated in the New Testament as eternal is *aión* (αἰών) in noun form, and *aiónios* (αἰώνιος) in adjectival form. The word into which *aión* is sometimes translated “eternal” indicates an endless duration. But this translation is a poor rendition of the phrase if that is not what *aión* actually means. John Wesley Hanson writes that “if the Greek *Aión - Aiónios* does not denote endless duration, then endless punishment is not taught in the Bible.”²⁴ Disproving the idea that hell is eternal is enough to show that the wider context of Scripture does not require that we take “all” in the universalist passages to be implicitly limited, and thus that we must seek a theory like Inevitabilism to understand how both the conflicting themes of hell and universal salvation can both be held true.

²⁴ John Wesley Hanson, *The Greek Word Aión -- Aiónios translated Everlasting -- Eternal in the Holy Bible, Shown to Denote Limited Duration* (Chicago: Northwestern Universalist Publishing House, 1875), http://www.tentmaker.org/books/Aion_lim.html.

The etymology of the words themselves indicate that the word did not develop from terms that mean time without end. Aristotle suggests that *aión* is the result of the combination of *aei* (ἀεί or “ever”) and *ón* (ὄν or “to be”) which would give it a sense of “continuous existence,” rather than endless duration. Aristotle uses the term in reference to the limit of the life of each individual, and thus it acquires a sense of endless duration only in reference to God, whose life he describes as an “*aión* continuous and eternal.”²⁵ The root word Aristotle uses, *aei*, “is used eight times in the New Testament, and not in the sense of endless, once.”²⁶ Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance explains that *aei* means “always” or “ever,” but only in the sense of “continued duration; “ever,” by qualification, regularly; by implication, earnestly.”²⁷ Thus, it seems that *aei* and *ón* indicate a continuous existence, rather than an endless one. As Hanson says, if “*aeiόν*, is [the] origin [of *aión*]... it cannot mean more than continuous existence, the precise length to be determined by accompanying words. Adopt either derivation, and indefinite duration is the easy and natural meaning of the word.” The etymological source of the words does not seem to offer any evidence that the term should be interpreted as meaning endless eternity. However, etymology is only a best guess, and the meanings of the terms can change. Thus, we must turn to its lexicography by comparing different definitions of the word across the centuries.

An examination of the lexicographic history reinforces this fundamental lack of evidence for *aion* as “eternal.” In the fourth century, Theodoret of Cyrus claims that

²⁵ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance: Complete and Unabridged* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), s.v. “104. ἀεί.”

“*Aión* is not any existing thing, but an interval denoting time, sometimes infinite when spoken of God, sometimes proportioned to the duration of the creation, and sometimes to the life of man.”²⁸ Somewhere between the fifth and seventh centuries, the ‘father of lexicography,’ Hesychius of Alexandria defines *aion* as “the life of man, the time of life.”²⁹ John of Damascus agrees with this reading, adding that the “whole duration or life of this world is called *aión*” and that the “life after the resurrection is called ‘the *aión* to come.’”³⁰ All of these definitions indicate that *aión* means some limited scope of time, ranging from possible definitions of ‘lifetime’ to ‘eon,’ but never as limitless time. It is not until the sixteenth century that Varinus Phavorinus, a teacher to the future Pope Leo X, indicated any change in the definition of the word, adding to the end of a similar definition that *aión* means “eternal and endless as it seems to the theologian.”³¹ It seems that somewhere between St. John of Damascus and Varinus Phavorinus, *aión* had developed a new meaning beyond its biblical context. Rather than changing from the time between Aristotle and the New Testament, this lexicography suggests that it changed sometime between the eighth and sixteenth centuries for theological reasons. Thus, from a lexicographical perspective, it seems as though *aión* does not mean eternal in the Scripture.

²⁸ Theodoret of Cyrus, quoted from *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, trans. into Latin by Jacques Paul Migne, Vol. IV, 400, trans. by Hanson, *Greek Word*.

²⁹ Hesychius, *Alphabetical Collection of All Words* available for review in *Hesychii Alexandrini Lexicon*, ed. Kurt Latte (Hauniae: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1953), 47; trans. by Hanson, *Greek Word*.

³⁰ John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book II Chapter 1, trans. by Hanson, *Greek Word*.

³¹ Varinus Phavorinus, *Magnum ac Perutile Dictionarium*, trans. by Hanson, *Greek Word*.

This finding is backed up by the way in which the word was actually used in the Old Testament. The term ‘olam,’ translated as *aión* in the Septuagint and often ‘forever’ or ‘everlasting’ in most English translations, is used throughout the Scriptures to indicate circumstances that have since ended. The Aaronic priesthood is promised to continue forever.³² The laws given to Moses are declared to be an everlasting law.³³ The descendants of Abraham are promised the land of Israel forever.³⁴ David and his line are said to rule forever over Israel.³⁵ The temple is set up as a place which will stand as God’s home forever, and Jerusalem is where it will remain forever.³⁶ Gehazi’s leprosy will go on forever.³⁷ The stones the Hebrews placed at the Jordan will stay there forever.³⁸ The righteous will possess Israel forever.³⁹ Jonah will be stuck in the belly of the beast forever.⁴⁰ Yet all of these things come to an end.

To be fair, there are various ways of interpreting several of these examples. Jesus can be seen as taking up the Aaronic priesthood and the Davidic line of kingship. The Jews have since returned to Israel and restored Jerusalem, and the Temple may yet be rebuilt. But all of these interpretations do not suppose endless duration, but instead duration with points at which the promise is and is not fulfilled. At best, it should be

³² Numbers 18:19.

³³ 1 Chronicles 16:15; Psalm 119:151-152.

³⁴ Genesis 13:15.

³⁵ 1 Chronicles 13:15; 1 King 9:5.

³⁶ 2 Chronicles 7:16.

³⁷ 2 Kings 5:27.

³⁸ Joshua 4:7.

³⁹ Isaiah 60:21; Psalm 37:11,29.

⁴⁰ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

interpreted as ‘choppy’ eternity, that sometimes does and sometimes does not exist, the very essence of which means there are various endings. But choppy eternity does not explain away several of the other uses of *olam*, such as Jonah’s exit of the beast. Such an interpretation would require that Jonah later end up in the beast again, but this time, forever. Thus, there is good reason to believe from the actual usage of the term that *olam* and thus *aión* does not mean endless duration in the Old Testament.

This observation is further reinforced by Hebrew scholars. John W. Haley states that *olam* “does not imply the metaphysical idea of absolute endlessness, but a period of indefinite length... a very long time, the end of which is hidden from us.”⁴¹ John Taylor agrees with this conclusion, stating that *olam* “signifies eternity, not from the proper force of the word, but when the sense of the place or the nature of the subject require it, [for example] God and his attributes.”⁴² Johann Friedrich Schleusner agrees, defining *olam* as “duration determined by the subject to which it is applied.”⁴³ Thus, when applied to God, *olam* would mean eternal in the sense of without beginning or end. But in reference to many other examples, *olam* simply indicates a period of time with an indefinite end. Hanson explains that ancient Hebrew simply did not have a word for endless duration, instead using different idioms to convey the idea: “To express a past eternity they said before the world was; a future, when the world shall be no more.”⁴⁴ *Olam* of *olams* is commonly translated as age of ages, because an eternity of eternities is

⁴¹ John W. Haley, *An Examination of Alleged Discrepancies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1951), 216.

⁴² John Taylor, *Hebrew Concordance*, quoted in Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁴³ Johann Friedrich Schleusner, *Novum Lexicon Graeco-Latinum in Novum Testamentum*, trans. by Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁴⁴ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

simply incoherent. It seems *olam* must have been used to indicate a duration in the Old Testament modified by the particular noun to which it applies.

The writers of the Septuagint translated *olam* as *aión* with full understanding of the classical use of the word. Edward Beecher states that *aión* “commonly means merely continuity of action” and that in Greek, the use of *aión* to designate eternity is unknown.⁴⁵ Noted anti-universalist Tayler Lewis explains that the term could indicate “pertaining to the world to come,” but states that it is an error to expand the term any more than that.⁴⁶ If the biblical authors had intended to signify endless duration, they could have used the much clearer term, *aidios* (ἄδιος), which is the classical word for the idea.⁴⁷ Ezra S. Goodwin believes that Plato invented the word *aión*.⁴⁸ Plato uses *aión*, but attaches the prefix *makr* or ‘long’ to the front of it, thus adding duration.⁴⁹ Once again, a long eternity is a rather confounding term. He describes the souls in Hades in an *aiónion* intoxication, but in the *Phaedon* discusses the fact that this is a temporary state before returning to life. Plato also contrasts the gods and humans by calling the gods *aidios* while calling human souls and bodies *aiónios*, or “belonging to time.”⁵⁰ Aeschylus and Aristotle both also use the word *aión*, but modify the term by adding some qualifier that

⁴⁵ Edward Beecher, from a series of papers later published as *History of Opinions on the Scriptural Doctrine of Retribution* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), quoted in Hanson, *Greek Word*. The text is available at <http://www.tentmaker.org/books/Retribution/DoctrineOfRetribution.html>.

⁴⁶ Tayler Lewis, quoted in Hanson, *Greek Word*. The original citation is not present, but probably comes from *The Six Days of Creation; or The Scriptural Cosmology, with the Ancient Idea of Time-Worlds, in Distinctions from Worlds in Space*.

⁴⁷ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁴⁸ Ezra S. Goodwin, in *Christian Examiner*, Vols. x, xi, and xii. (Boston: Gray & Bowen), quoted in Hanson, *Greek Word*. The Examiner is available here: <https://archive.org/search.php?query=the%20christian%20examiner>.

⁴⁹ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*.

signifies that it is an *aión* without end.⁵¹ Herodotus, Isocrates, Xenophon, Sophocles, Diodorus Siculus also use the word in reference to a specific age, confirming this reading.⁵² As Hanson explains, “the classic Greek writers, for more than six centuries before the Septuagint was written, used the word *aión* and its adjective, but never once in the sense of endless duration.”⁵³ Again, the word does not seem to denote endless duration.

The usage of the term is further reinforced by its use by writers contemporary to the biblical authors. The Jewish historian Josephus uses the word frequently.

Josephus applies the word to the imprisonment to which John the tyrant was condemned by the Romans; to the reputation of Herod; to the everlasting memorial erected in re-building the temple, already destroyed, when he wrote; to the everlasting worship in the temple which, in the same sentence he says was destroyed; and he styles the time between the promulgation of the law and his writing a long *aión*.⁵⁴

Furthermore, when Josephus intended to signify eternal damnation, he used the word *aidios* rather than *aión*. When he recounts the Pharisees, he discusses the fact that they believe sinners are “are detained in an everlasting prison [*eirgmon aidion*] subject to eternal punishment [*aidios timoria*].” Likewise he describes that the Essenes held the wicked would go to a dark place full of “never-ceasing punishment [*timoria adialeipton*].” Jewish scholar and contemporary of Christ, Philo “always uses *athanaton*, *ateleuteton* or *aidion* to denote endless, and *aiónion* for temporary duration.”⁵⁵ Henri

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Beecher, *History*, quoted in Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁵³ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁵⁴ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Estienne claims that three generations make up one *aiónios*, showing the fact that this is a limited term.⁵⁶ The scholars contemporary to the writing of the Scriptures repeat this same term to delineate limited duration. It seems unlikely that the authors of the Bible would use a bad definition of an obscure word to offer a precise teaching when at least three clearer words are available.

New Testament Usage

New Testament usage also seems to bring significant doubt on the idea that *aión* is used to mean eternal. Jesus uses the word *aión* in contrast to the Jews of the era, whose religious teachings utilize *aidion*, *adialeipton*, or *athanaton*.⁵⁷ The contrast in so many of Christ's teachings are clear, and this seems to be no exception--Jesus rejects the language of his day in favor of another term that has historically meant an indefinite period of time. There is little evidence to believe that the term had changed its meaning between the Old Testament and the New.⁵⁸

All of this evidence suffices to prove information which is reinforced by the usage of the word elsewhere in the New Testament. The real objection comes from Greek scholars who claim that the noun does mean "age," but that the adjective, despite its earlier uses to the contrary and lexicographical and etymological evidence, means "eternal without end." The problem that arises once again is the fact that *aiónios* is used in a mode without that meaning. Romans 16:25-26 is rendered, "the mystery that was

⁵⁶ Henri Estienne, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, trans. by Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁵⁷ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed.” The adjectival form of the word here dictates that that “eternity” clearly has had an end. The secret is now revealed. God’s love has ended the eternity before, and has now entered into this new phase of creation.

It is also worth noting that the very idea of punishment with which we approach the text is not that which is actually implied by the words there written. In Matthew 25:46, the word “*kolasin*, rendered punishment, should be rendered chastisement, as reformation is implied in its meaning.”⁵⁹ Hebrews 12 and Proverbs 3 both speak extensively of the way in which God will chastise those God loves in order to bring them into correction. Lamentations 3:31-33 brings the discussion to the foreground: “For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he [will] cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.” This passage teaches that God will not cast off any person for all time. The punishment taught throughout the third chapter in Lamentations is horrible and terrifying, yet God does not allow it to happen simply as punishment, but instead as a method of reform. This explanation gives light to Jude 7, which describes Sodom and Gomorrah as “undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” This fire, however, does not continue to burn. It can be compared to Hebrews 12:29 or Malachi 3:2-3, where God is a consuming and refining fire, burning away the imperfections until it is complete, leaving only that which is good.⁶⁰ The verse might better be rendered that Sodom and Gomorrah undergo a cleansing of age-enduring and thorough fire, until it is made clean.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Hanson, *Greek Word*.

The argument against this reading would make far better sense if the doctrine was more clearly articulated. The term, “eternal punishment,” occurs fourteen times in the New Testament.⁶¹ As Hanson asks, “Now if God's punishments are limited, we can understand how this word should be used only fourteen times to define them. But if they are endless how can we explain the employment of this equivocal word?”⁶² If this is truly what is meant, then the writers of the Scriptures ought to have used a word that could not imply any other meaning, as the Pharisees of Jesus’ day had done. Furthermore, such a doctrine ought to have littered the entirety of the Scripture as a warning to everyone, rather than having occurred so few times. The passages conveying the idea of universal salvation are clear and present throughout the Bible, but evidence of eternal damnation is limited both in number of occurrences and in the kind of clarity that would make this doctrine as urgent as some would have it be. Thus, the evidence suggests that hell is not eternal, and thus there is little reason, on balance, to think that “all” is implicitly limited in the universalistic passages.

Conclusion

The Bible contains verses that strongly suggest that all will eventually be redeemed. God is clearly willing that all are redeemed, and the Scriptures reveal that God is patient past our own understanding in achieving all that God wills. Thus, hell cannot be of the evangelical variety. The five verses brought up to counter universalism face significant difficulty, largely because the term translated as “eternal,” does not denote

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

“endless duration,” but rather a very long age. The punishment of God, likewise, seems to suggest that it is limited and for the purpose of refinement. All of this suggests that hell is not eternal. I will show in the next chapter that the doctrine of post-mortem chances is the best explanation of several passages and God’s own motivation, suggesting that hell is not inescapable. Inevitabilism simply needs to prove that there is no implicit limitation on God’s ultimate redemption of all people.

CHAPTER 3

Ignorance and Inevitability

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; God's mercies never come to an end.

They are new every morning, new every morning;

Great is your faithfulness, O Lord, great is your faithfulness.

The Steadfast Love of the Lord,

Edith McNeill

In Chapter 1, we examined the problem of hell as a horrendous unnecessary evil as it relates to the goodness of God. We focused our attention on two possibilities, Mild Hell and Inevitabilism. In Chapter 2, we examined the rival themes of hell and universal salvation, the former which motivates the Mild Hell view, and the latter which motivates Inevitabilism. We sought to see if there was a contradiction between the passages of Scripture which seem to teach a vision of hell and the passages of Scripture which seem to teach universal salvation. Through an examination of the term sometimes translated in our Bibles as “eternal,” we saw that there does not seem to be a strong argument for an implicit limitation on the passages teaching that all would be saved. From this understanding comes another question: How is it that all can accept the free gift of salvation? This chapter will attempt to show that there is little good reason to hold that the possibility of accepting the free gift of salvation ends at death, and that in fact, there is good reason to believe that possibility never ends.

The problem of hell faces another difficulty in the common way we discuss the hope of salvation we hold for those ignorant of God's free gift of salvation. For those who died before hearing the word, such as babies and lost people groups, our common theology provides a solution to their lack of salvation. The ignorant are granted a sort of special grace, whereby they can enter into heaven, ignoring the normal rules. But this

solution proves difficult indeed. In this chapter, we will examine a biblical motivation for a solution to the problem, the plight of the ignorant, the five possibilities of how God could deal with the ignorant, and why post-mortem chances stand above the others as the most biblically sound, most just, and most likely scenario.

Post-Mortem Chances at Salvation

This work strives to prove that Inevitabilism is possible. There are good reasons to argue for other strands of universalism, but this work is focused in on the specific idea that if God can always offer the free gift of salvation to those who accept it of their free will, all will inevitably be redeemed through Jesus Christ eventually. The idea that God can always offer the free gift of salvation I will call the doctrine of post-mortem chances. This doctrine arises from several different motivations, two theological, two biblical, and one traditional. Theologically, if God is a free being, then God could always offer salvation. Furthermore, even if God was not free, then God's goodness would allow God to always offer the gift of salvation. Biblically, it is clear from passages discussed in Chapter 2 that God is not willing that any shall perish. God's will is such that we would expect God to act in such a way as to bring it about, which means not limiting the possibility of salvation to life lived on earth. The traditional motivation reinforces this idea through the Apostles Creed, which shows that from the very beginning, the church believed Jesus could and did go into hell for the express purpose of bringing out the previously damned. One might counter that this part of hell is some sort of limbo, set aside for holy people who had died before Jesus. But then I see no reason from the tradition to distinguish this section of hell from any other until much later, suggesting that

all of hell is simply a form of limbo. For all of these reasons, the motivation to say that God can offer the free gift of salvation to the damned rests on a solid foundation, and one from which Inevitabilism arises.

The greatest foundation, however, comes from the Scripture itself. In 1 Peter 3:18-20, Jesus is described as having died for saints and for sinners, and then descending to preach to the “spirits in prison because they formerly did not obey.” Here, Jesus’ descent is explicitly for the purpose of saving sinners from earlier generations. If you hold to a view that the afterlife and the present life do not exist on the same field of time, then there is a possibility that Christ remains in hell even now, preaching to all of the souls who have ever and will ever die and be damned in order to bring them to repentance. There is certainly no reason in the text given as to why this preaching and everlasting gift of salvation would no longer be extended to those who died in a condition similar to the damned who came before Jesus. 1 Peter 4:5-6 goes on to explain that the dead were preached to so that they might live in the spirit of God, suggesting that even after death, one might come to be a Christian.

The only things that comes close to strongly countering the doctrine of post-mortem chances are Hebrews 9:27 and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. The parable once again is dangerous for anyone who claims that salvation comes through grace alone, rather than through works, not to mention the fact that there is nothing to suggest that the rich man could not later come to accept the gift of salvation and be freed from damnation. Thus we are left with a single verse, which says only that a single judgment comes after death. Post-mortem salvation can occur before or after judgment; the saved does not then necessarily have to face a second judgment to be saved. Nothing

in that verse indicates that there is an end to God's willingness to extend salvation, only that God, at judgment, will send the dead either to heaven or to hell. God remains free to save whomever asks for God's free gift of salvation. Thus, hell is not obviously inescapable. This chapter will explore more about why post-mortem chances of salvation are our best explanation of commonly held theological positions on the destination of the lost, the disabled, and children.

The Problem of the Ignorant

Even at a young age, I was deeply disturbed by the idea that some people would not hear about Jesus, and thus burn in hell forever. When I was a little boy, I walked around my neighborhood asking if I could take my neighbor's soda cans to return them for the five cent deposit so that I could give money to some missionaries I knew working in Indonesia. Missionary work was a race against time, trying to reach as many people before they died to tell them about how they could go to heaven. I was placated by an elder in my church, who explained that God would have mercy on those who did not get to hear about Jesus, and that they would be saved.

This thought is common enough that a few years later as I sat among a group of clergy, one pastor regaled an old joke that cast this theology in a new light. A missionary was sent to the Inuit people in the Arctic Circle where no Christians had ever been before. He set to work learning the language, translating the Scriptures, and converting the people. He preached on hell and damnation, and after one such sermon, he was called before the village elders. One chief asked him, "If I do not accept Christ, will I be saved?" The missionary responded, "I am afraid not." The chief looked at him again and

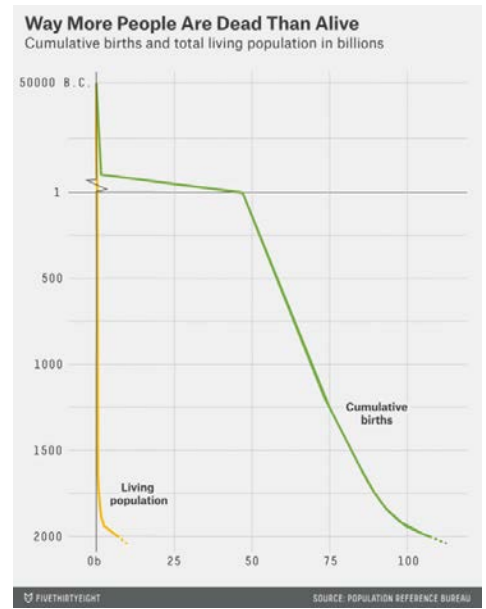
asked, “What about my ancestors, who have lived without knowing Christ? Will they be saved?” The missionary then explained that God would provide a path of salvation to those who were not reached by missionaries. The chief begins to laugh a deep laugh. “Then why would you come and tell me about Jesus?” This joke reveals that our common attitude about the salvation of this chieftain’s ancestors is that we believe that God will have mercy on those who die ignorant of God’s grace.

The argument for the salvation of infants runs along similar, but more narrow lines. The tragedy of a child’s early death, or the similar problem of the eternal state of the severely mentally disabled, raises significant problems for anyone attempting to think about hell. If the simple equation that faith in Jesus is the only way into heaven, and faith requires intellectual assent, then it seems that human beings unable to give that intellectual assent are incapable of being saved. According to the Population Reference Bureau, 47.1 billion people died before Jesus was born.⁶³ The data below reveals the ratio of births to the living population across time.⁶⁴ It reveals an astounding fact: for most of human history, for every one living person, seventy babies died. When you begin to then reflect on the great number of children who have died before any sort of intellectual capacity, it seems that the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived died before even possessing the capacity to attain salvation, much less having heard the message. But only those with the greatest emphasis on the depravity of man accept this option as

⁶³ Carl Haub, “How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?” Population Reference Bureau, last modified October 2011, last accessed October 06, 2017, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2002/HowManyPeopleHaveEverLivedonEarth.aspx>.

⁶⁴ Mona Chalabi, “What Are The Demographics Of Heaven?” FiveThirtyEight, last modified October 14, 2015, last accessed October 06, 2017, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-are-the-demographics-of-heaven/>.

theologically legitimate. Several denominational traditions have arisen as a response to this horror. An admittedly rather Baptist understanding of the practice of infant baptism is an attempt to lessen the weight of the terrifying possibility that so many children would burn in hell, by ensuring that these innocent children are saved, even though they may not yet understand. Most common theology contains within it a sort of ‘grace’ period, before which the child is deemed incompetent to make sinful decisions, as illustrated by John Piper. He explains in response to Jesus’ words in John 9:41 that “if a person lacks the natural capacity to see the revelation of God’s will or God’s glory then that person’s sin would not remain--God would not bring the person into final judgment for not believing what he had no natural capacity to see.”⁶⁵ Typically, Protestants hold to the idea of an “age of accountability,” after which the child is deemed capable of seeing God’s revelation, and thus can be held accountable. It is no leap in logic to likewise extend this idea to those who are mentally disabled to the point of being unable to make such a decision. The basic idea is that God will extend mercy upon those who do not understand their wrongdoing, and that this ignorance is a legitimate excuse from the punishment of hell.



We are then forced to ask why ignorance is not a legitimate excuse for everyone else. Jesus is to the Christian the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the perfect friend,

⁶⁵ Matt Perman, “What Happens to Infants Who Die?” Desiring God, last modified January 23, 2006, last accessed October 06, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-happens-to-infants-who-die>.

shepherd, and king, who does not give too heavy a burden that he will not help us to carry nor allow us to live a life lacking in fullness. How can anyone who truly faces such a Lord resist worshipping him? Paul is the greatest example of this transformation, from a man who saw Jesus as an evil cult leader deceiving his people, into a servant of that same man who spread the Gospel to all the corners of the earth. A rejection of Christ is either legitimate or not. To reject Christ would be to reject perfection, and there is no good reason to reject perfection. Thus, there is no legitimate reason to reject Christ. Perhaps there are legitimate reasons to reject Christ's followers. Perhaps also there are reasons to reject an incomplete picture of Christ. But both of these are because they fail to see Jesus clearly. A cloud fogs their vision. They reject Christ out of ignorance. Just as those who have not yet heard the word and those who cannot accept the word are seemingly pardoned from their ignorance, we must extend this grace to those who have heard the word in ignorance.

If God had intended for the salvation of the world, but had tasked only a church limited by time and location to bring the world to Christ, then only very few people would even ever be presented with the possibility of salvation. The grace of ignorance cannot be logically limited to babies and the mentally disabled, for those who have not heard the word or do not understand the word are essentially in the same boat. The problem of the ignorant thus leaves us with five possibilities: 1) that God reveals Godself to each individual at some point in life, 2) that God extends grace to those who merit it, 3) that God instantly saves the ignorant, 4) that God provides an opportunity for all to be saved after death, or 5) that God simply damns the ignorant.

Jesus the Revelator

The first possibility posits that God makes some sort of special appearance in the life of every individual in order to offer them a chance at repentance and accepting the free gift of salvation. There is certainly a precedent for this experience: Nineveh's mourning, Saul's conversion, and accounts of modern Arab Christians who convert after dreaming a dream about Christ. According to one evangelical leader, "as many as 5 percent of the worldwide Muslim population could have had such a dream," which would mean about 80 million people.⁶⁶ Supposing these numbers are correct, we are still left with a real puzzle: what about the other 95% of Muslims? Or the other 77% of people on the planet? Or the other 108 billion people who have lived throughout history? If Christ was making a specific and special appearance in the life of every individual throughout all time, then why are these stories the exception, rather than the rule? It seems to me that such a phenomenon would be all that we could ever talk about rather than something that is apparently a secret so great none of us tell one another. We do not actually see this revelation reported in the lives of most people. Perhaps God does reveal Godself to all people, but does so in such a way that the recipient does not understand it to be God. But a failure of communication to that degree seems an issue on behalf of God, rather than the human being receiving the vision. The human would simply remain ignorant, not solving the problem in the first place. But this view finally fails because it has no obvious biblical basis. Nowhere in the Scriptures does anyone actually say that God will personally reveal Godself to each individual human being to make sure that they receive

⁶⁶ Michael Carl, "Rising Number of Muslims Reporting Dreams about Jesus," World Net Daily, last modified November 01, 2014, last accessed October 06, 2017, <http://www.wnd.com/2014/11/rising-number-of-muslims-reporting-dreams-about-jesus/>.

the gift of salvation; such a situation would seem to undermine the very idea of missionary activity. Due to the lack of reported evidence, biblical evidence, and the fact that if it is the case it does not solve the problem of ignorance, this possibility can safely be put to rest.

Methods of Salvation

There are three possible methods by which the unsaved could achieve salvation, which make up option 2, 3, and 4. Option 2 describes the “Written on the Heart,” (or WotH) possibility, that God provides a natural mode of salvation by which the goodness of a person can merit salvation. Options 3 and 4 say that God must offer the gift of salvation to all who are ignorant of Jesus Christ, either through immediate salvation or through some sort of presentation after life. Both options fall under the category of Post-Mortem Chances (or PMC). The former option of immediate salvation is what I will refer to as “immediate universalism,” and the latter option is the basis of inevitable universalism or “Inevitabilism” as I refer to it. I defend Inevitabilism in this work, and thus will focus on this latter possibility. All three responses are attempts at understanding how God might respond to the ignorant.

These modes develop as a response to a puzzle in Pauline theology. In the letter to the Romans, Paul presents two seemingly contradictory positions in a matter of a couple of chapters. Romans 1:20 reads, “For [God’s] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So [humans] are without excuse.” Here, it seems that Paul is teaching a sort of natural theology, from which a knowledge of God is

sufficient for punishing those who would hide God's truth. This idea is reinforced soon after, when Paul writes in Romans 2:13-15 that

“it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.”

From this verse, it seems that the righteous person who has never heard of God will be saved. This verse gives credence to the idea that the merit of the one who does not believe is sufficient to escape hell. Yet Paul profoundly muddles this point, if that is his intention. In Romans 3:23, he teaches that “all have sinned,” and in Romans 6:23 that “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Is the righteousness discussed earlier in the passage able to make men good enough to escape punishment and merit this gift, or merit the death that sin promises? If it does merit sin, then the obedience to God those men attempted is not sufficient in some way, yet they are damned presumably without any mode of possible redemption. That does not seem just or fitting. The righteous person's ignorance thus presents a serious problem.

The 'Written on the Heart' Mode

The WotH mode is able to answer simply that in some way, man may be judged righteous according to obedience to the natural law presented before him. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that, “the dead Christ went down to the realm of the dead.

He opened heaven's gates for the just who had gone before him.”⁶⁷ The Catholic Encyclopedia explains that non-Catholics can still be just as long as they possess “the serious resolve to do all that God has commanded, even if His holy will should not become known in every detail.”⁶⁸ This article is careful to note that it is not just those who have not heard of the sacraments, but also those who do not recognize them who can still be saved. This note is an implicit recognition that there are some who have heard the Gospel and yet still remain ignorant of its truth. A just atheist in the modern day, who does what is good according to a natural law of love that he recognizes, may be saved due to his desire to do what God has commanded, even though he may not recognize who God is in life. His actions reveal some sort of implicit faith. As long as the law of God is written on the heart of the just person, their belief system does not seem to matter.

But Romans 10:9 states, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Here Paul seems to be making a distinction between simple faith and an action in response to faith presented to the individual. In the next verse, he explains, “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” With one part, an action is completed and renders a result; with another part, another action is completed and renders a different result. Charles Talbert explains that these “are not separate acts; they are two parts of one act: the outer and the inner. Hence what is asked for is a response of the total self.”⁶⁹ S. Lewis Johnson further explicates that one “is the outward

⁶⁷ “Christ Descended into Hell” in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, last accessed October 06, 2017, Number 637, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p122a5p1.htm.

⁶⁸ “Justification” in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, last accessed October 06, 2017, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08573a.htm>.

⁶⁹ Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 257.

side and the effect of the other. Faith is the inward side of the matter and the cause of the confession.”⁷⁰ Faith illicit a response of confession in the believer, both of which are necessary for salvation. Solomon Andria explains what the confession is in stating that in “the New Testament, professing, (or “confessing”) is used almost as a technical term meaning to publicly and solemnly declare a truth.”⁷¹ Implicit faith does not illicit such a response of declaring truth, for the just person in the WotH mode remains ignorant of what truth needs to be declared. The intellectual assent may reside, but true faith “cuts through the danger of mere intellectual assent. Indeed, [explicit] faith is born in the act of confession.”⁷² As the Catholic *Glossa Ordinaria* puts it, “truth must both be believed and spoken.”⁷³ The interplay between faith and confession, especially as a single act, means that both components must be present in order for salvation to be attained. It is only together that “Confession and faith have salvation as their consequence.”⁷⁴ The just person with implicit faith in God, seeking to follow God’s commandments, cannot know the truth to which she must assent, and thus cannot accept God’s gift of salvation. At the core of the relationship between faith and confession is that in these verses, the “parallelism is not meant to be a disjunctive but progressive, moving from internal faith

⁷⁰ S. Lewis Johnson, *Discovering Romans: Spiritual Revival for the Soul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 167.

⁷¹ Solomon Andria, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 194.

⁷² Tom Holland, *Romans: The Divine Marriage* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 354.

⁷³ *Glossa Ordinaria on Romans*, trans. By Michael Scott Woodward (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011), 159.

⁷⁴ Roy A. Harrisville, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 165.

that is evidenced in righteousness to external confession that is evidenced in salvation.”⁷⁵

But since in the person with implicit faith there is no possibility for moving to confession, the whole of this two-sided yet single act is left unaccomplished, and the righteous pagan is thus damned.

Post-Mortem Chances

Thus, we are left with one final disjunctive with three possibilities. Either God damns the ignorant (which includes not just the bad pagans but also babies, the mentally disabled, the righteous who did not hear the word, and those who rejected a corrupted picture of God), God saves the ignorant, or God gives the ignorant post-mortem chances to accept the free gift of salvation. From the common theology, we know that the idea of God condemning the ignorant to hell seems too unjust, and thus that a good God could not do it. To argue that a good God could condemn billions of people to hell for not understanding a lesson that was not clearly explained to them seems to me to suppose a fundamentally different God than the one I believe we see in the Christian Scriptures and tradition. We are forced to say either that God will simply save all of those people for no good reason, seeming to have set up a situation in which those who have heard about Jesus must accept him to achieve salvation, while those who did not accepting Christ's free gift, possibly against their will and without taking that necessary step. This line of thought seems to fail for the same reasons that the WotH mode does, namely that it does

⁷⁵ Stanley E. Porter, *The Letter to the Romans: A Linguistic and Literary Commentary* (Sheffield, United Kingdom: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 199.

not require the faith-confession act that Paul outlines. Thus we are left with the option of post-mortem chances.

Post-mortem chances solves the problem of the ignorant for each constituent group, while retaining the free will of each individual, the possibility of damnation for those who reject it, and an opening for God to fulfill God's promise to bring all to redemption. For the righteous who have not heard, Jesus will be able to reveal himself to them, and through their right deeds they will recognize that it is he for whom they have lived good lives; babies and the mentally disabled could be healed and relieved of the various issues which prevented earlier intellectual assent to faith or audible confession; those who rejected a corrupted picture of God will have the lies which previously clouded their judgment swept free; and those who never heard or detected the good laws they were meant to follow will be presented with the whole story, and all will be able to accept the free gift of salvation. We know from the Scriptures that Jesus does reveal himself to people after death. He will judge all people, so everyone will at that moment see him. We also know that according to the early creeds Jesus descended into hell and preached there. This sort of revelation does not suffer from the lack of epistemological evidence that the earlier suggestion does, as we would have no record of Jesus' appearance to those who had totally and finally died. It is possible, and to me even probable, that at this moment Philippians 2:10-11 will be fulfilled "so 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." But it is possible that in that moment, some will utilize their free will to reject God's free grace, and thus will damn themselves to hell. If we posit that God could provide one post-mortem chance, then there is no reason to

believe that God could not continue to allow post-mortem chances for the damned until all accept the free gift of salvation. To reject the possibility of post-mortem chances is to say either that God extends grace to those who are unable to take part in the good news and can only condemn those who hear it and reject it (making it rather bad news) or that God condemns babies, the mentally disabled, and all those who have never had the chance to respond to God's gift to eternal damnation. Neither of these options seem very loving, just, or good. Thus, it would seem that we have substantially good reason to believe in the possibility of post-mortem chances for redemption.

In conclusion, God must either send a whole lot of people to hell for no reason, to heaven for no reason, or allow for the individual to choose for themselves at some point in the afterlife. Both of the previous answers create significant problems for the idea of love and justice, and thus it seems that post-mortem conversion is the likeliest option. I will go on in this work to argue that if post-mortem chances for redemption are allowed, universalism becomes inevitable. The logic of the claim itself is rather simple: Given that God is a being of infinite power, infinite goodness, and infinite patience, God will not give up until all are saved.

CHAPTER 4

Two Asses and a Giant Fish

*He is Lord, he is Lord! He is risen from the dead, and he is Lord!
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!
He is King, he is King! He will draw all nations to him, he is King;
And the time shall be when the world shall sing that Jesus Christ is King!*

He is Lord,
Sung in the Baptist Tradition

In Chapter 1, we examined the problem of hell as a horrendous unnecessary evil as it relates to the goodness of God. We focused our attention on two possibilities, Mild Hell and Inevitabilism. In Chapter 2, we examined the rival themes of hell and universal salvation, the former which motivates the Mild Hell view, and the latter which motivates Inevitabilism. We sought to elucidate a possible contradiction between the passages of Scripture which seem to teach a vision of hell and the passages of Scripture which seem to teach universal salvation, and found there is little reason to limit God's mercy to a few. In Chapter 3, we sought to understand how God could bring all to redemption. We examined our common theological assumptions about the mercy of God toward those who do not understand God's love in this life, and I argued that there is little functional difference between the way God ought to treat babies, those who had never heard of God, and those who rejected God for logically bad reason. We discussed God's potential methods of dealing with the ignorant, and thus settled on the idea that God could simply extend the possibility of accepting God's free gift of salvation beyond the point of death. This next section is devoted to the question that if we grant post-mortem chances, can

God actually bring all to redemption? In this chapter, we will focus in on human free will, and ask if God would be able to freely bring those who reject God into redemption.

Perhaps the strongest argument against Inevitabilism rests on the grounds of free will. The universalist sentiment rests on a simple deduction: If God is all powerful, he can save everyone; if God is all good, he will save everyone; therefore, all will be saved. This formula is complicated, however, by the addition of free will. Jerry Walls explicates a view that states free will is incompatible with universalism, and this chapter will be devoted to disputing his case.

Free Will

God's act of creation is a necessarily self-limiting act. God is omnipotent, and could do whatever God wanted to do. However, God elected to create a universe that abides by particular logical rules. Some of those rules include the law of gravity and the law of noncontradiction. God could have made it so that bodies of mass are not attracted towards one another or that two contradictory statements could both be true, but God did not; thus God limited God's power in interacting with the created world. God sustains the boundaries of our existence in such a manner that God will not act in such a way as to violate those boundaries. As an example, God could not make a married bachelor, for the definition of a bachelor is an unmarried man. It could not be true that a man could be simultaneously married and unmarried (barring some opaque distinction). It is important to note that I do not here deny that God has the *power* to do such a thing because God can do anything God wants to do, but only assert that God does *not* do such a thing out of

respect for the laws God set up to govern our world. Thus, God limits God's self in order to bring about creation.

One of the most important ways in our daily life that God limits God's self is in relation to our free will. God's gift of free will to human beings is a decision not to intervene in every circumstances so as to make all things immediately good. God can and will "work all things together for good,"⁷⁶ but as a condition of free will, we must be able to experience the consequences of freely chosen decisions. God cannot simply intervene and interpose the right choice on human beings in every instance, but instead allows us to choose bad things and make bad decisions in order to have free will. God limits God's self so that we can have free will.

God's omnipotence is thus necessarily limited by the free will of human beings. A simple theodicy generally concedes as much. A good God allows evil to exist so that human beings can freely choose to love. God cannot force us to love, or the character of that love will not be legitimate; it will be like the love an inanimate object is capable of having for God. Free will gives love the depth of being the freely chosen, and thus legitimate, action of its agent. This legitimate and free love seems to be an act of a free God, who desires love freely given from human beings in a mutual relationship. Free will logically requires that we have a multiplicity of possible actions, and thus means that we are capable of rejecting the love and good of that relationship. That rejection results in the evil that we see in the world today. That evil is a necessary byproduct of the end that God desires: freely chosen love.

⁷⁶ Romans 8:28.

But because of the free will necessary to allow for freely chosen love, it seems that God can not do anything to overpower the sinner who consistently chooses evil, for to do so would be to violate their free will. Thus, Jerry Walls argues, “If we are free either to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation, then perhaps God, even though omnipotent, *cannot* save everyone.”⁷⁷ God is limited by the free will of the rejecting party, and in order to preserve their free will and thus their potential love, God cannot force them to love God and join God in heaven. As Walls explains, when “freedom is consistently maintained, it will be recognized that God’s ability to bring about certain states of affairs is contingent upon the choices of free creatures.”⁷⁸ God could not both allow meaningful freedom and force all to accept the gift of salvation.

Walls argues that the freedom God grants us challenges our ability to be confident about universalism. He says that if “people are genuinely free in their relationship to God, and that future free actions are unknowable in principle, then [we] should not pretend that we can be confident that all will be saved.”⁷⁹ The very fact that our future free actions are not yet determined prove that even God could not know if all choose the free gift of salvation, much less that human beings could know it. Given this circumstance, it is possible that “God could be willing to save everyone, but unable to do so.”⁸⁰ God may provide a mechanism through which all might be saved, such as a post-mortem sermon from Jesus himself. But if the sinner rejects even this presentation, God cannot force the

⁷⁷ Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 73.

⁷⁸ Walls, *Hell*, 81.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

damned to change their minds and choose heaven, provided that the choice of heaven must be freely made.

Why Would Anyone Reject Heaven?

An implicit assumption in Wall's argument is that in order for God to respect a choice of free will, there must be a valid motivation for the rejection of heaven. There seem to be four major reasons why someone would reject heaven: 1) the sinner consistently chooses evil in such a way as to see hell as a better option than heaven, 2) the sinner thinks that they lived a righteous enough life and therefore reject Christ's free gift of salvation, 3) the sinner has in some way developed a hardened heart, or 4) for no good reason. It seems to me that these four options make up the logical realm of possibilities, and all other considerations collapse into one of the others. If a sinner is ignorant of God, then God could reveal God's self enough for the sinner to make a rational decision--and if the sinner still rejects God, it would be for one of these four reasons. The final option seems the easiest for God to outmaneuver, for God could simply work until the sinner sees that rejecting heaven is too great a good to give up. If the sinner still resists, then it would seem that the sinner has some motivation to resist, probably being a hardened heart. But if there are only three reasons why someone would reject heaven, that would still mean that many people reject God. Even if the premises of their motivation are false, they have chosen hell over God. Thus, we must examine these motivations further to understand if God might be able to outmaneuver them.

Walls claims that there are three main motivations why the sinner might reject God's gift in such a way that God could not overpower their free will rejection. As the

first motivation, Walls claims that the “only common feature of the damned... is the consistency of their evil.”⁸¹ Here, Walls does not set up the sort of second nature evil that Stump assumes, but argues along similar lines that the individual becomes damned by living a life of disordered desires such that the right desire never conquers the wrong desire. The habit of this disorder becomes entrenched, subjugating every desire under this decisive decision to do evil. A person thus formed would be left in a situation where “there is no place left for good to even get a foothold.”⁸² In order to make a choice for the good, good must have some appeal for the sinner. If good cannot get a foothold, then evil’s consistency in that person’s life means that they could never freely choose God, and thus would remain damned forever. This damnation may in fact be the best way for God to love the consistently evil person, for “it may be that those in hell approximate happiness in some sense because they get what they want.”⁸³ But one could object that that approximate happiness is simply because the sinner is deceived about what they truly desire. Walls replies that this “deception is self-inflicted” because these unrepentant sinners have in “their desire to justify their choice of evil... persuaded themselves that whatever satisfaction they experience from evil is superior to the joy which God offers.”⁸⁴ Not to give them what they want would be cruel to the individual by giving them something that they think they do not want. That choice is one that the sinner has made, and although it is incorrect, to violate that choice would be to violate the nature of

⁸¹ Ibid., 123.

⁸² Ibid., 120.

⁸³ Ibid., 126.

⁸⁴ Walls, *Hell*, 129.

free will in the individual. Thus, God could not simply redeem those who have chosen consistent evil.

Walls holds that a second motivation to reject the free gift of salvation is that those who do so feel that they ought to have been justified by living a righteous life. Walls has said in the past that the problem of the righteous damned cannot be solved by any other answer than that their supposed righteousness prevents them from admitting their sin and seeking forgiveness.⁸⁵ Pride in their “humility” becomes a barrier to their salvation. Perhaps these souls are resentful that their lives of holiness and separation from the sins of the world did not merit them salvation, while the free gift of salvation is given even to despicable people. In this way, the righteous damned are like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, who when he heard that his father was throwing a party for the rebellious son, “was angry and refused to go in.”⁸⁶ These proud sinners would not want to accept the help of Jesus in coming into heaven, and thus would not want to enter into the kingdom of heaven at all.

Walls’ final thought on possible motivations comes down as some combination of the previous two, in which the individual does not absolutely choose either good or bad, but instead simply refuses to accept the gift of salvation due to a hardened heart. These individuals are solidified in their rejection of God, but not by consistent evil or pride; their heart has simply been hardened by some other factor. Some of these individuals may have been hurt by the church in such a way that God’s love appears to them quite different from how it truly manifests. Perhaps others have lived lives of such great

⁸⁵ Walls made this remark at the Baptist Association of Philosophy Teachers Conference, 2016.

⁸⁶ Luke 15:28.

apparent injustice that they feel there cannot be true good in God. The example that the Bible gives is that of Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened by the plagues God brought against Egypt to such a degree that Pharaoh would not free the Hebrews from bondage.⁸⁷ Those of hardened hearts may thus reject God's free gift of salvation, and choose hell in order to be away from God.

Walls thus holds that these motivations could cause people to choose hell, and that thus God could not forcibly redeem extreme sinners, the self-righteous, or those of hardened hearts without violating their free will. If God could not change their minds, then the damned would remain in hell forever. God could not force them to choose otherwise, and because God chooses to respect the law of free will that God set up as a boundary for our existence, universalism cannot be accomplished.

A Witness to God's Outmaneuvering

Wall's argument is philosophically deep, but biblically inadequate. The witness of the Bible presents us with three examples that match up to these motivations, and show how God outmaneuvers them to bring about God's will. In 2 Peter 3:9, the Apostle teaches that God is "patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." God is infinitely resourceful, and has infinite time to bring the damned to God's self. The King James Version renders that verb, "wish," with a more precise term, saying that God is "not willing that any shall perish." Peter Geach once said that "Nobody can deceive God or circumvent him or frustrate him; and there is no

⁸⁷ Exodus 9:12.

question of God trying to do anything and failing.”⁸⁸ God may be unable to simply violate human free will, but the biblical witness shows that divine will will outmaneuver human will in every circumstance. God is unwilling to leave the damned in their position. In the following stories, we will see that just as God was unwilling to let Balaam curse the Israelites, Saul kill more Christians, or Jonah to avoid preaching God’s redemption to his worst enemies, God can outmaneuver the possible obstacles to God’s will.

The story of Balaam contains all the drama of a classic children’s Bible story. According to the book of Numbers, Balaam was some sort of seer with special gifts. Balak, king of the Moabs, in summoning Balaam to curse the Israelites, claims that “he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”⁸⁹ Rabbi and Professor Kristine Garroway explains that Balaam was likely both a diviner and a sorcerer, terms lost on us today, but particularly relevant for the story. As she explains it, a “diviner is one who seeks to ascertain the will of God, and a sorcerer is one who wishes to change the will of God.”⁹⁰ The Apostle Peter evidently understood Balaam to be a sorcerer rather than a servant of the Lord, for he writes, “Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing... was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.”⁹¹ Thus the story goes: Balaam was hired by Balak to curse the Israelites, but at first he refused because God told him not to go. The next day, he goes despite God’s warning, and is met with heavy resistance from

⁸⁸ Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 5.

⁸⁹ Numbers 22:6

⁹⁰ Kristine Garroway, “Balaam: A Case Study in True Prophecy,” *Reform Judaism*, published October 04, 2012, last accessed October 08, 2017, <http://reformjudaism.org/balaam-case-study-true-prophecy>.

⁹¹ 2 Peter 2:15-16

his donkey. Balaam beats the donkey three times before God gives a voice to the poor creature, who tells Balaam that an angel is standing ahead of them ready to kill them. Balaam repents, and goes on to follow God's commands. Rather than cursing the Israelites, Balaam blesses them, and seems unable to speak anything other than what God tells him. His will is submitted to God's own, who was not willing to let Balaam curse God's people. Balaam even declares, "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"⁹² God's mind will not be changed, and God's will shall triumph. Balaam leads an evil life, and goes on to defy to God's commandments. Revelation 2:14 notes his sins in teaching the Israelites to "eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality," and Joshua 13:22 records that Balaam dies while fighting against the Israelites in a final struggle. If any figure in the Bible could be described as "consistently evil," it would be Balaam. Yet God is able to overcome his free will in such a way that does not violate his free will in order to bring about goodness for God's chosen people. If God could act in such a way with Balaam, then there is little evidence that God could not similarly work in the lives of other consistently evil people.

A parallel narrative further illustrates that God's will outmaneuvers human will in the New Testament. Saul, a righteous Jewish leader, is persecuting the cult called at that time 'The Way.' On the road to Damascus, a bright light suddenly appears in front of him, knocking him to the ground (traditionally from the back of a horse or donkey, although the text makes no comment) and blinding him. One of Christianity's greatest early enemies is confronted by Jesus himself, showing himself in his power and glory so

⁹² Numbers 23:19

beyond Saul's capacity to understand that he is left completely without sight. After Saul is given new sight, he becomes known as Paul and becomes a great source of blessing to all the Gentiles.⁹³ The Jewish Christians at the time wanted to exclude Gentiles, and it was not until Paul, alongside others, proved against them that God was still working with those the Jews considered lost that Gentiles were accepted.⁹⁴ Their concept of chosenness had to expand to meet God's love and God's will that all would be saved. Paul explains in Philippians 3 that if anyone deserved salvation through righteousness, it was him. He had followed every commandment in the Torah, lived a godly life, and had even gone above and beyond the requirements to seek to wipe out those who seemingly opposed God. But God did not respect Saul's free will so much as to allow him to persecute the church. Instead, God worked in his life in such a way as to not violate his free will while still bringing Paul to redemption.

The prophet Jonah similarly held to a self-righteous standard that excluded those he considered outside of God's love and mercy. When Jonah refuses to obey God to preach to the sinful city of Nineveh and gets on the first ship in the other direction, God cause a huge storm, and Jonah is thrown into the sea. A big fish swallows him up until he learns his lesson, and then God makes the fish throw him up just outside the seemingly unredeemable city. God sees that it is proper to redeem even those who so opposed God's rule over their life by these extraordinary means. Jonah believes that the evil of Nineveh is so great that they do not deserve forgiveness. When Nineveh repents, Jonah yells at God and declares that he knew all along that God is "a gracious God and merciful, slow

⁹³ Acts 9:1-19

⁹⁴ Acts 15:1-35.

to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”⁹⁵ Even those beyond the pale are capable of receiving God’s redemption. The hardness of Jonah’s heart is revealed by the fact that in the entire book, his only experience of happiness is when a plant grows. When God destroys it with a worm, Jonah declares that he wishes to die. The book ends when God tells Jonah not to pity the worthless plant, and instead, God says, “Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”⁹⁶ Jonah is primarily concerned about not helping his worst enemies. If you read this story as taking place during or after the Assyrian conquest of Israel, then Jonah has a good reason to resent these people. He was likely affected directly by their sins as they killed and pillaged his homeland. And yet these are the people to whom God calls Jonah to preach redemption. Jonah does still harbor the resentment he began with when he fled from this task in the first place. But God is able to work around his hardened heart to bring redemption to the people of Nineveh. In the end of the story, we are left without a resolution for Jonah himself. We are not told directly that Jonah sought out redemption, but from the witness of Nineveh and countless other testimonies over the course of the Christian tradition, we can rest assured that God could bring about this redemption for Jonah too.

⁹⁵ Jonah 4:2

⁹⁶ Jonah 4:11

Conclusion

It is clear from these three examples that God is willing to use extraordinary means to accomplish God's will without violating an individual's free will. If God is willing and able to do these things apparently compatible with human free will, what is it to say God is not willing to do that in each particular case? God is infinitely resourceful, and God can wait for as long as it takes to bring everyone to redemption. The question then shifts from one of whether or not God determines all things to whether God is determined enough to continue to pursue each individual sinner. Walls wants us to imagine the sinner as an immovable object that God is not willing to use God's unstoppable force against. But Inevitabilism posits that God will use God's unstoppable force against each sinner, none of whom God would allow to become truly immovable objects. Eventually, each individual sinner will accept God's unrelenting love and gift of salvation. Whether it is because they are sinners like Balaam, self-righteous like Saul, or of a hardened heart like Jonah, God will bring all to redemption. As Jason Goroncy puts it, "This is the God of relentless grace – the Hound of Heaven – and it is he and not death or any human decision who will decide how history ends."⁹⁷ This is not a question of free will versus determinism, but one of a sinner's will versus the determination of an omnipotent God.

⁹⁷ Jason Goroncy, "Joy is the Serious Business of Heaven," published September 12, 2010, accessed October 22, 2017, <https://jasongoroncy.com/2010/09/12/joy-is-the-serious-business-of-heaven/>.

CHAPTER 5

The Character of Hellish Souls

*Depth of mercy! Can there be mercy still reserved for me?
...I have long withstood his grace; long provoked him to his face;
Would not hearken to his calls; grieved him by a thousand falls;
... [Yet] there for me the Savior stands; shows his wounds and spreads his hands;
God is love! I know, I feel; Jesus weeps, and loves me still.*

Mercy for the Chief of Sinners,
Sung in the Methodist-Episcopal Tradition

In Chapter 1, we presented the problem of evil. In Chapter 2, we sought to understand how to counter the problem of evil with the apparent universalistic teaching of the Scriptures, and saw that there is little good reason to limit God's promise that God will redeem all people. In Chapter 3, we examined the position of the ignorant to argue that God will not end the possibility of accepting the free gift of salvation at the point of death. This section is devoted to asking if that given post-mortem chances, if God can actually bring all to redemption. In Chapter 4, we asked if God could freely bring all people into redemption. A condition of the theodicy that was presented in Chapter 1 is that God allows evil things to happen so that we can freely choose the good of loving God. If God were to simply force us into heaven, then that would seem to violate that free choice of love, and thus undermine our free will. However, because this work is one of biblically-informed philosophy, we turned to the Scriptures for examples of events where God outmaneuvered human will in such a way as to bring about God's own ends without violating human free will. In this chapter, we will next turn to the question of whether or not the freely chosen evils of a person's life could so corrupt their nature that God is unable to outmaneuver their free will in such a way as to bring them to redemption.

What if sinners were in such a state that they could not choose God? One of the strongest philosophical arguments against Inevitabilism is that the character of the kind of person who goes to hell is permanently altered so as to be rendered incapable of accepting the gift of salvation. Eleonore Stump argues from Thomas Aquinas that such a person takes on a secondary and lesser nature of such a variety as to be rendered incapable of freely choosing God, and because God must respect their decision, these sinners cannot be saved. Stump goes on to assert that hell is in fact the *most merciful* thing that God could do for such a person. I will argue instead that God has several different options, each of which are objectively better for the sinner, and thus that permanent damnation of these sinners is not the *most merciful* thing God could do.

Stump's Argument

Eleonore Stump claims that God's love is obligated to respect an adopted secondary nature that would make keeping sinners in a permanent hell the most merciful thing God could do for them. Stump's view of God's love is fundamentally rooted in Aquinas' conception of being and nature. Aquinas explains that "that by which each thing is called good is the virtue that belongs to it."⁹⁸ Virtue, in this context, means a deed done particularly and uniquely by the referential thing, which Aquinas recognizes as the purpose or function of that thing. In other words, the goodness of a thing depends upon

⁹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, "Book One: God," trans. Anton C. Pegis, in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, ed. Joseph Kenny (New York: Hanover House, 1955-1957), I.37.2, accessed March 19, 2017, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles.htm>.

fulfilling its nature.⁹⁹ Aquinas takes from Aristotle an understanding of humanity as a rational animal, and that the unique virtue of the human being is the rational principle by which humans order their actions.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the nature of a human being is to be rational. Given the case of human rationality, it is obvious that some individuals utilize rationality to a greater degree than others. Stump explains that this is due to a difference between capacity and actualization. A capacity is a potentiality of being, but the actualization or use of that capacity brings the potential into being as actual. Stump explains that thus, “by the actualization of a capacity, being is increased.”¹⁰¹ Being is thus intimately connected with the goodness of a thing. Stump explains the distinction between the two by affirming that “the ordinary sense of ‘being’ is the existence of an instance of some species, and the ordinary sense of ‘goodness’ is the fulfillment of a thing’s nature, which is brought about by the actualization of its specific capacity.”¹⁰² Being enables goodness to occur by actualization, which then brings more being to actualization. The fulfillment of a thing’s nature is an act of goodness, and this relationship is further illustrated by appeal to the divine nature. Since God “is His very act of being... God is, therefore, goodness itself.”¹⁰³ The greater the actualization of a thing’s nature, the greater its being and goodness. Granted that the virtue of human beings is reason, then “what makes a human being good as a human being... is the exercise and actualization of rationality.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ See also Stump, “Dante’s Hell,” 189.

¹⁰⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 2002), I.13.

¹⁰¹ Stump, “Dante’s Hell,” 189.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Aquinas, “Book One,” I.38.2.

¹⁰⁴ Stump, “Dante’s Hell,” 190. There is more to being human than being rational, but for the purpose of this paper, Stump’s understanding of rationality is of primary concern.

To be rational is the end of human nature, and to follow reason is thus to grow in likeness with God.

Aquinas defines vice as opposed to a thing's nature and thus in human nature as opposed to rationality. Stump sums up Aquinas' view of reason by explaining that "to act rationally is to love more the things which are better,"¹⁰⁵ which ties reason directly to an Aristotelian conception of seeking the good. The good for a thing is the fulfillment of its nature, which in turn increases its being, thus making the thing more like God. Since God is also the general good to be pursued by all reason, then according to reason, God "should be loved most of all."¹⁰⁶ Vice is thus the opposite: a failure to love God in accordance with reason. Vice stands in opposition to the human nature God has given to man, that of reason, and exchanges it for one that loves things out of proportion to their goodness. Stump takes this further, and suggests that vice is so toxic that it can deteriorate humanity's true nature. The habituation of sin means a constant failure to actualize one's potentiality of being. Aquinas indicates that there is a "twofold nature in man, rational nature, and the sensitive nature."¹⁰⁷ Human beings carry out rational acts through the sensitive nature. But if the rational nature is ignored, it can be usurped by the sensitive nature. Rationality is man's unique virtue, while the sensitive nature is found in almost all animals. Subjecting rationality beneath the sensitive nature thus makes human beings behave more like animals than according to the true nature humanity has received. Aquinas suggests that "sin destroys the principle of the order whereby man's will is

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, published online at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>, IaIIa q.71 a. 2 ad. 3.

subject to God,” and explains that “the disorder will be such as to be considered in itself, irreparable.”¹⁰⁸ Stump extends this even further. She argues that “the habitual actions of the damned... [are] destructive of the being of persons habituated to them, and... so both the actions and the character of the damned are contrary to their nature.”¹⁰⁹ The very being of the sinner is deteriorated. Sinners lose some part of themselves that makes them human. Stump suggests that an extended habit of character “is itself a kind of nature; and we commonly refer to such a state as a *second* nature, an acquired cast of character which is produced over a period of time by our free choices.”¹¹⁰ This second nature at some point effaces the first nature given to humanity by God within the sinner.

J.R.R. Tolkien seems to properly sum up the state of such sinners.

They obtained glory and great wealth, yet it turned to their undoing. They had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them. They could walk, if they would, unseen by all eyes in this world beneath the sun, and they could see things in worlds invisible to mortal men; but too often they beheld only the phantoms and delusions... And one by one, sooner or later, according to their native strength and to the good or evil of their wills in the beginning, they fell under [its] thralldom... And they became forever invisible... and they entered into the realm of shadows.¹¹¹

Tolkien thus describes the creatures he calls Nazguls, who exchanged their first nature as human beings and took on a negative secondary nature through which they thought they would get what they really wanted. This state seems to be the same sort of state that Stump ascribes to the sinners who consistently chose evil. Thus I will refer to the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., IaIIa q. 87 a. 3.

¹⁰⁹ Stump, “Dante’s Hell,” 195.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., Stump’s emphasis.

¹¹¹ JRR Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), 346.

secondary and acquired nature as the Nazgul nature, and those who suffer from this nature as Nazguls.

Stump asserts that this means God's love requires that God treat the sinner according to this negative second nature. Stump explains that for "God to love a human being, then, involves his doing what it is open to him to do to ensure the most good for that person."¹¹² The good of the person in this consideration is the relative good of each individual, not appealing to the good that is God's essence. Stump summarizes Aquinas as saying that "to love something is to treat it according to its nature."¹¹³ This second, acquired, Nazgul nature becomes the standard by which God must love the sinners, and thus the general good is subjected to the relative good of the sinner. Since "the goodness of anything is the actualization of the capacity specific to that thing's nature, and so to desire the good of anything is to desire the fulfillment of its nature,"¹¹⁴ God must seek to fulfill this acquired nature in order to pursue the relative good of each Nazgul. God therefore must allow the sinners to enter hell, as their second nature desires something apart from God, leading to separation from God. Jerry Walls explains that "the misery of hell is not so much a penalty imposed by God to make the sinner pay for his sin, as it is a necessary outcome of living a sinful life."¹¹⁵ Having adopted that second nature, the Nazgul adopts the fate of damnation as the fulfillment of a life lived as less than a full human being. Hell is eternal because people keep choosing evil, and will not choose

¹¹² Stump, "Dante's Hell," 192.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 150.

otherwise. Thus, Stump argues, hell is the most merciful thing God could provide for Nazguls.

A Response to Stump

Inevitablism may respond to Stump's argument by appealing to God's mercy in reference to Nazguls, and rejecting the possibility of acquiring that second nature in the first place. Stump's defense of hell rests on her summary of Aquinas as saying that God must love sinners according to their second nature, and that hell is the most merciful thing God could do for Nazguls. But in this section, I will first attempt to show that Aquinas does not seem to suggest that God has to love Nazguls qua Nazguls, but instead according to their human nature. I will go on to argue that since God is infinitely resourceful, God could still find a way to outmaneuver Nazguls. I will then show that even if God could not outmaneuver sinners, God has other, more merciful options on how to treat sinners.

Assuming that Stump is correct about Aquinas' belief that a human can acquire a second nature, Aquinas does not seem to assert that God must love Nazguls qua Nazguls. He says simply, "to love a person is to wish that person good."¹¹⁶ When Aquinas talks about the good, he speaks specifically about the supreme or absolute good that is God.¹¹⁷ The absolute good of all things, and thus of human beings, is to be with God. In an objective sense, there is no good higher than God, and thus to wish the good for a person is to wish God for the person. But Stump exchanges the good that God must wish them

¹¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia q. 20 a. 1 ad. 3.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Ia, q. 6 a. 2.

from this absolute good (i.e. God) to a relative good for the sinner. Stump claims that God cannot love recalcitrant sinners qua human beings, but instead must love them qua Nazguls. But it is not clear that this is what Aquinas means. In fact, Aquinas does not seem to hold a view even compatible with this, for he asserts that love is when a person “puts the other, as it were, in the place of himself; and regards the good done to him as done to himself.”¹¹⁸ Love requires the valuing of another as one values one’s self. God has completed this act through the Incarnation, putting God’s self in the form of man through Christ in order to have done to God’s self what ought to have been done to man. God thus values human beings in the same way that God values God’s self. But God would never treat God’s self so as to treat God according to a secondary nature. This understanding seems to indicate that Aquinas would not agree with Stump’s argument, and gives us reason to believe that if God would not send God’s self to hell for all eternity, God would not send human beings to hell for all eternity.

Stump’s concept of a second nature creates another problem for her argument. Stump adopts Aquinas’ view that heaven is union with God, and understands union with God as “the state of freely willing only what is in accord with the will of God.”¹¹⁹ The necessity of free will to make the decision to serve God is central to her theology of hell. God could not force anyone to change their will, or their will would not be free, and thus “it is not within God’s power to ensure that all human beings will be in heaven.”¹²⁰ To be forced to make a free decision is simply a paradox that cannot be dismissed. Yet the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., Ia q. 20 a. 1 ad. 3.

¹¹⁹ Stump, “Dante’s Hell,” 194.

¹²⁰ Ibid., see also 195.

biblical witness shows that God was able to outmaneuver the Sorcerer Balaam, the Prophet Jonah, and the Apostle Paul in such a way as to bring them to freely choose God's own will. God thus seems capable of outmaneuvering Nazguls as well.

Stump's thesis assumes that the Nazguls have deteriorated to such a low level as to reject their rationality, and thus be stuck in hell forever. But at such a low level of being, it seems as though they have lost the capacity for reason. Stump herself asserts that God will limit the damned from ways of rejecting their rationality "by putting restraints on the evil they can do," so that God "can maximize their being by keeping them from additional decay."¹²¹ But in this second nature state, so slave to sin, it seems as though the damned have no rational capacity left to respect. If God does allow them to maintain a small bit of free will, then God always allows for the sinner to take a step on the correct path. Thus, it seems that after enough time, sinners must make the correct decision and seek God, which opens the possibility for universal salvation. If God did not maintain this minimal rationality, then it seems as though God would not have any reason to continue to respect their will against their best interest. God knows what is objectively good for the sinner, and could paternalistically not respect their free will. If an ignorant child ran into the middle of a busy street, we would fault the parents if they did nothing to save the child and bring about the child's good end. Likewise, we do not respect the free will decisions of drug addicts, but instead intervene when their will has come to such a point as to be unable to resist their temptation without help. Just as we intervene with addicts who have become slaves to their poison, God could simply save the ignorant sinners--a

¹²¹ Ibid., 197.

possibility which Aquinas allows.¹²² Thus, even if God allowed the existence of a second nature, God stills has more merciful options than the one Stump posits.

The final reason to reject Stump's argument comes from the question of whether or not this view of hell is in keeping with God's character. Stump sets up a moral dilemma for God. Either God must provide the relative good for each person, or God must violate their free will. But it seems to me that God cannot be put in a moral dilemma, for God immediately knows the good in every circumstance both because God is omniscient and because God is goodness itself. God's omnipotence dictates that God cannot be stuck in a situation where God cannot bring all things together for good. If a Nazgul has deteriorated to such an extent that he no longer has the free will to choose God, then it seems there is no good reason for God to continue to respect the Nazgul's free will. Aquinas asserts that God "is more inclined to be merciful than to punish."¹²³ The question we must ask of the doctrine of hell is a simple one: Is this God's *most merciful* option? In this circumstance, God has no reason not to simply act paternalistically and give the Nazgul what is good for him. Unless God has some reason to respect the free will of someone who no longer possesses it, then it seems God can do what God wills. Thus, it seems Stump's hell is not the most merciful option God has in dealing with sinners.

¹²² Aquinas, *Summa*, IaIIa q. 87 a 3.

¹²³ Ibid., IIIa q. 1 a. 20.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Eleonore Stump asserts on a Thomistic basis that sinners obtain a second nature due to their sin, and that God sends sinners to hell out of love and respect for this second nature. However, the person with the secondary nature would still need to be sustained in existence, and either God would have to restore them to some point of being capable of choosing God (meaning inevitably that they will), or they would lose the capacity for free will. God would then have no reason to respect their foolish free will decision, and would simply save them. Inevitablism rests its case on the grounds that eternal suffering is not the most merciful option a good God would have to accomplish God's ends, and thus that a good God would not use this horrendous evil.

CHAPTER 6

Hell as Hiddenness

*I once was ignorant of grace, though living in its light...
But then I saw a God of grace, so eager to forgive
He let His Son die in my place, that in Him I might live.*

I Once was Ignorant of Grace,
David L. Ward

In Chapter 1, we presented the problem of evil. In Chapter 2, we sought to understand how to counter the problem of evil with the apparent universalistic teaching of the Scriptures, and saw that there is little good reason to limit God's promise that God will redeem all people. In Chapter 3, we examined the position of the ignorant to argue that God will not end the possibility of accepting the free gift of salvation at the point of death. This section is devoted to asking if given post-mortem chances, that God can actually bring all to redemption. In Chapter 4, we asked if God could freely bring all people into redemption, and the biblical witness seems to affirm that God does outmaneuver human will in such a way as to bring about God's will. In Chapter 5, we asked if human beings were capable of assuming a state that we called the "Nazgul" nature to such an extent that God could not outmaneuver them in such a way as to bring them to redemption, and thus the most merciful thing that God can do is leave them in hell. The consistently evil person, it seems, at some point loses the capacity for free will, and thus cannot choose God, and would only be happy in hell. However, it seems that God does not need to respect the choices of one who no longer has a capacity for free will, and that God could simply redeem them to such a state that they could eventually

choose God. In this chapter, we will end our discussion by asking if God could redeem those who simply experience God's glory as a sensation of hell.

In this chapter, I will explain Zachary Manis' concept of hell as the orientation of those incapable of experiencing God's love. Manis' option holds that this lack of ability to appreciate God's presence is in fact hell, and that on the Day of Judgment, God will reveal God's self in such a way that no one can flee from God's presence. The damned would thus never be able to choose God, because they would view God as the source of their torment. Thus, Manis will argue, the damned will never be redeemed. If the damned will never be redeemed, then we cannot hope for Inevitabilism. I will present an argument that because this vision of hell is insufficient in answering the biblical argument in favor of either universalism or hell and fails in a vital premise, it does not rule out the possibility of Inevitabilism.

Manis' View

Manis' option claims that hell is not separation with God, but instead an incapacity to experience God properly. Manis holds that "the Day of Judgment marks the definitive end of divine hiddenness."¹²⁴ He rests his reason for this belief on Ephesians 4:10, in which Christ is described as descending to the earth so that "he might fill all things." In that moment, God's presence will fill all things in creation, and the damned will be unable to avoid it. We will experience God's restoration of all things to God's self as God's presence is made known everywhere. But our capacity to enjoy God will vary according to the kinds of lives we have lived, as Stump affirms. Sarah Jane Murray

¹²⁴ Manis, 9.

extrapolates from Dante's *Paradiso* the metaphor of a cup.¹²⁵ Each human being will experience God as fully as they can, as if they are a cup filled to the brim with good wine. But some of us, perhaps great saints like Thomas Aquinas or Mother Teresa, will have cups the size of barrels and bathtubs, while those of us who live less good lives will have cups that are only as big as spoons. Heaven will be the experience of those who have achieved salvation, and thus have cups full of good wine. But, on the other hand, hell will be the experience of those who have not achieved salvation, and might be described as having a cup of good wine that they do not have the taste capacity to enjoy, and this capacity is one they cannot develop. As Manis explains, "heaven and hell are not two "places" to which the saved and damned are consigned, respectively, but rather two radically different ways that different creatures will experience the same reality."¹²⁶ Sinners and saints are in the same place, but for the sinners, the wine is totally unenjoyable, leaving them without the experience of God. We will all be full--but our capacity to experience God will be limited by our being, and our being is dependent upon our goodness and thus our likeness unto the divine. But for the sinners who have rejected the capacity to grow in that goodness, their experience of God's presence will be hell.

Manis holds that this is what hell truly is by rejecting physical interpretations of hell. Manis asks, "how can there be eternal separation from the presence of an omnipresent God?"¹²⁷ Manis reflects the declaration of the Psalmist, who cries out, "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend

¹²⁵ Private lecture.

¹²⁶ Manis, 7.

¹²⁷ Manis, 8.

to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!”¹²⁸ The doctrine of divine conservation, Manis claims, echoes this thought. According to the doctrine, “nothing metaphysically distinct from God can persist for even a moment on its own, apart from the continual, sustaining power of God. There can be, then, no metaphysical separation from God.”¹²⁹ Thus, even those who argue that there is a hell have to put the argument in “purely relational rather than metaphysical terms: hell is separation from God only in the sense that there is no fellowship or communion between God and the damned.”¹³⁰ Manis therefore holds that hell is not actually spatially located, but is instead simply the subjective mental experience of the damned.

Manis finally holds that God’s presence will cause such pain to the sinner that the unredeemed could not choose redemption.

The prospects for salvation after the Day of Judgment appear dim, for once God is fully revealed, the damned will forever after experience the very being of God as agonizing. They experience God as the One who torments them--even without God’s “doing” anything--and thus it seems likely that it is no longer psychologically possible for them to come to love God.¹³¹

God’s presence, love itself, would be the source of pain for the damned. There is nothing, it seems, that God could do to cause them to come to a point of being able to ask for forgiveness. Thus, the damned are damned forever, for they are incapable of even experiencing God’s love as anything but hell. If the damned cannot be saved, then there is no hope for Inevitabilism.

¹²⁸ Psalm 139:7-8.

¹²⁹ Manis, 8.

¹³⁰ Manis, 8.

¹³¹ Manis, 12.

Refuting Manis' Hell

Manis' vision of hell may be described with the following argument:

1. Hell is the experience of an unredeemed soul's participation in God's presence.
2. God brings all people into God's presence for eternity.
3. God could not limit God's presence to such a degree that the unredeemed soul could choose redemption.
4. If hell is the experience of an unredeemed soul's participation in God's presence, God brings all people into God's presence for eternity, and God could not limit God's presence to such a degree that the unredeemed soul could choose redemption, then God could not bring the unredeemed soul to redemption.
5. Therefore, God could not bring the unredeemed soul to redemption.

The argument is valid, but rests on faulty premises. In the following section, I will discuss the failures of premise 1 in regard to the biblical narrative, premise 2 in regard to God's redemptive plan, and premise 3 in regard to God's freedom as a divinely hidden being.

Hell as Banishment

Manis' interpretation of hell as the damned soul's personal experience of the beatific vision fails to adequately deal with the Scriptural description of hell. Manis' view treats hell as a purely subjective mental experience, rather than as a physical place away from God. The existence and importance of hell in Christian eschatology is evidenced by

the fact that it “is addressed in some way by *every* New Testament author.”¹³² In the imagination of these writers, hell is a real and tangible place of punishment and distance; “that one could be ‘thrown into hell’ suggests that it was understood in physical and spatial terms.”¹³³ Hell itself is a place described primarily in terms of fire, augmented by further palpable modifiers that cause the skin to crawl.¹³⁴ The physicality of this picture of hell is further emphasized in the language of banishment around it. Hell is “pictured as separation from the kingdom of God, exclusion from the presence of God, or being cut off from something living.”¹³⁵ It is set up “in contrast to the ‘kingdom of God,’”¹³⁶ an abstract concept that will one day be made concrete and real on this earth.¹³⁷ By examining Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and Paul, we can see that heaven is a tangible place of those made right through Christ, while hell is a tangible place apart from him.

Mark suggests the importance of the physicality and location of hell. Mark describes the suffering of those in hell in vivid and specific ways, explaining “that those who languish in hell are tormented not only by the ‘fire that is never quenched’ but also by the ‘worm’ that never dies.”¹³⁸ The details of the fire and worm require a certain level of embodiment, and seem to render moot a reading that suggests that these terms are simply an extended metaphor that lacks a physical truth. While the worm itself may not

¹³² Christopher W. Morgan, “Biblical Theology: Three Pictures of Hell,” in *Hell Under Fire*, ed. by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Patterson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 142.

¹³³ Daniel Frayer-Griggs, “Hell: New Testament,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Dale C. Allison, Jr. et al., vol. 11 (Boston, Massachusetts: 2015), 754.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 753.

¹³⁵ Morgan, “Biblical Theology,” 136.

¹³⁶ Frayer-Griggs, “Hell,” 753.

¹³⁷ Revelation 12:10.

¹³⁸ Frayer-Griggs, “Hell,” 754.

be a primary source of torture, it evokes an immediate somatic response and cultural reference. On a physical level, a worm is a creature without a head--literally without the requisite capacity for mental experiences. For the Jews, a worm is also a creature who feasts on dead bodies.¹³⁹ God uses worms as punishment for the Hebrews who did not trust God to provide enough manna, and to destroy Jonah's favored plant which protected him from the sun; both examples reference physical needs.¹⁴⁰ The worm strongly suggests hell as embodied punishment and separation.

Matthew continues the theme of the physicality of hell in his own Gospel. While Mark emphasizes the palpable punishments of fire and worm, Matthew goes even further, for "Matthew's description of hell entails an even greater physicality than does Mark's" own.¹⁴¹ Jesus explains that you should poke out a sinful eye or cut off a sinful hand because "it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell."¹⁴² Here again, the corporeal body is emphasized as being moved from one location to another. Losing an eye or hand is nothing compared to the physical disaster awaiting the damned in hell. But even greater than an emphasis on punishment, Jesus "likens hell to being outside or a place of exclusion [and] separation... of personal banishment from his presence and the kingdom."¹⁴³ From the parable of the sheep and the goats to the parable of the marriage feast, Jesus consistently says that those who have

¹³⁹ Job 21:26 and 24:20.

¹⁴⁰ Exodus 16:20 and Jonah 4:7.

¹⁴¹ Frayer-Griggs, "Hell," 754.

¹⁴² Matthew 5:29-30.

¹⁴³ Morgan, "Biblical Theology," 138.

failed to live up to the standard will be “will be thrown into the outer darkness.”¹⁴⁴

Matthew’s hell of physical punishment and distance only further reinforces the tangibility of hell, rather than a hell of mental experience.

John shares this vision of hell as a physical place of torment and distance from God. Those who do not know Christ are unable to enter the kingdom of God, and thus are excluded from heaven.¹⁴⁵ The home of the damned is called the “outside” in Revelation 22:15, likening to a banishment from heaven.¹⁴⁶ Beyond banishment, however, hell is “also a place of intense suffering” described in physical terms.¹⁴⁷ Throughout Revelation, it is described as a lake of fire and sulfur.¹⁴⁸ Once again, this specific image is meant to evoke a sensory context. Sulfur is an element with a distinct smell present in the spray of skunks and the stench of rotting eggs. The physicality necessary to experience that odious smell reinforces the literal distance John emphasizes. All of this language, for John, is meant to contrast heaven and hell. While in heaven, “believers experience the glorious presence of God. The wicked, by contrast, are left outside, unable to enter [the] heavenly city and... excluded from wondrous fellowship with God.”¹⁴⁹ The wicked cannot participate in a flawed version of the beatific vision because they are not physically present in the kingdom of God.

¹⁴⁴ Matthew 8:12.

¹⁴⁵ John 3:3-5.

¹⁴⁶ Morgan, “Biblical Theology,” 142.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 141.

¹⁴⁸ Revelation 14:10; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8.

¹⁴⁹ Morgan, “Biblical Theology,” 147.

Paul provides us the final block in this tower of evidence. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul describes hell as “away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” This verse alone is enough to disprove Manis’ first premise, for the damned are literally separated from God, so much so that they cannot participate in the beatific vision. God gives the saved a vision of the glory of God’s might, while such a vision is removed from these sinners. It is not a matter of a flawed perspective of God’s glory, but instead of a literal distance between those enjoying the beatific vision and the lost. The physicality of punishment serves to show that these earlier verses are meant to be understood as describing an actual place, rather than a purely subjective mental experience.

The Biblical picture describes a real, physical, and spatially located afterlife and a hell that is away from God’s glory. It is implausible to deny the physicality present in these few examples of the Scriptures. The damned are unable to participate in the beatific vision, and thus their experience of hell is in a place without access to God’s presence. As long as the sinners remain wicked, they “never experience unhindered fellowship with God. They are forever banished from his majestic presence and completely miss out on the reason for their existence--to glorify and know their Creator.”¹⁵⁰ It is entirely consistent to say that God can sustain a thing without God having made God’s presence known in that thing, which preserves the biblical concept of a real, spatially located hell and the doctrine of divine conservation. Manis’ vision of hell in his first premise is inconsistent with the description presented in the Bible, and thus cannot be taken as a viable alternative to the dichotomy between heaven and hell.

¹⁵⁰ Morgan, “Biblical Theology,” 147.

An Insufficient Redemption

Manis' argument that God's presence will return to the earth in a totally unavoidable way after the Day of Judgment seems scripturally tenuous. Ephesians 4:10 does indeed state that Christ came to earth so that God might "fill all things," but gives no timeline on the length of time that might take. Furthermore, the passage as a whole is stated in regards to the unity of the body of Christ. In fact, this section of the Bible is another I alluded to in Chapter 2 that comes to life in the light of universalism. Verses 6 and 7 teach that our God is the "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." God is not over only a select few, not only through a select few, and only in a select few. Rather, God is over all, through all, and in all. The restoration of God's presence, when God will in fact fill all things, seems more likely to occur in the slow process of our development into "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."¹⁵¹ Paul claims that our growth is why Christ gave different leaders to the church, and this act of preparation comes before God's full redemption. Thus, it seems that the very verse Manis points to as key to his premise that God's presence will come to earth in an unavoidable way actually teaches that God is slow to bring about God's full presence until all are redeemed.

Manis' view could be said, however, to reconcile the passages that seem to teach both that there is a hell for the damned and that all things will be restored to God. Manis could say that as God's presence is made evident again to the world, that God could rest

¹⁵¹ Ephesians 4:13.

content this redemption, which would result in restoration from God's perspective, but damnation for the individual. Under this view, God will one day restore all things to God's self for God's pleasure, rather than our own. But God does not seem content with this situation. As Alexander Pruss explains, "our agape [love] must include a unitive aspect when directed at people, because this is what the people we love need, and love's union with a... human being is only fully complete with reciprocation."¹⁵² God desires a reciprocal relationship with God's creation. Although hell is a punishment, Chapter 2 illustrates that God still declares that God wants all people to find redemption. It is enough for this point to simply say that God is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."¹⁵³ But Manis' view could attempt to suggest that God would be content to simply say that since all are in God's presence, that God's will has been fulfilled. All things are in a state of restoration, brought back to where they externally ought to be in orientation to God. The universe is sort of like a puzzle in which the once-scattered pieces have been put into place. From God's perspective, according to this thought, all things are redeemed, even if the subjective experience of the sinners in that redemptive act is one of torture and torment. But the Incarnation proves that the Christian God is a God concerned about human subjective experience. The Incarnation also proves that God is love, and the Bible teaches that love is grounded in empathy for the subjective experience of others. Thus, God's character would require that God's ultimate redemption be holistic and total, taking all of the person and making them right.

¹⁵² Alex Pruss, *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 13.

¹⁵³ 2 Peter 3:9, KJV.

The act of Incarnation proves that God as love is concerned with human subjective experience. As Hebrews 4:15 makes clear, Jesus is a leader able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” and understand the human perspective. Donald Macleod summarizes the experience of the Incarnate God in saying:

...in Christ God enters upon a whole new range of experiences and relationships. He experiences life in a human body and in a human soul. He experiences human pain and human temptations. He suffers poverty and loneliness and humiliation. He tastes death... Before and apart from the incarnation, God knew such things by observation. But observation, even when it is that of omniscience, falls short of personal experience. That is what the incarnation made possible for God: real, personal experience of being human.¹⁵⁴

God gained a personal subjective knowledge of the experience of human life through becoming a human being. God loves human beings in such a way as to lower God’s self from the divine position as the source of all being to one as a created being. God did this not only to accomplish the project of redemption, but also to prove that God loves us. “God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world” and allowed the Son to experience the trials of human life so that God could have a first-person knowledge of our subjective experience.¹⁵⁵

One of the central acts of love is empathy, which is only possible through a similar subjective experience of an event. Paul admonishes us throughout his letters to share in one another’s fortunes, both good and bad. We are to “weep with those who weep” and “rejoice with those who rejoice.”¹⁵⁶ Edward Farley explains that to “experience another’s sympathetic participation in one’s grief or another’s contemptuous

¹⁵⁴ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 186.

¹⁵⁵ 1 John 4:8b-9a.

¹⁵⁶ Romans 12:15.

dismissal is to be affected in one's being" in such a way as to evoke action.¹⁵⁷ Paul tells us to participate in empathy as an act of love, for acts of love are participation in God's own being. For Farley, it is our relation to God that moves us toward this kind of love, and the love displayed by Jesus is because "Jesus' relation to God orients Jesus empathetically and as such to any and all he meets."¹⁵⁸ Jesus as the sign that God loves us, in turn, means that "in Jesus, relation to God and empathetic concern become the same thing."¹⁵⁹ Jesus says as much in claiming that every act of kindness and love offered by a Christian to another is actually an action done for Christ himself.¹⁶⁰ Because God is love, and love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, [and] endures all things," then we can trust that God will recognize the subjective experience of the damned is one which stands in need of empathy, a need that will be fulfilled, for "Love never ends."¹⁶¹

If to love is to wish the best for another, then love would require that God's redemption is holistic and total, including the subjective experience of the damned. The empathy of God has no ends, and if God is free to do what God wants, then love will win. As Farley explains,

As infinite the divine empathy has no restrictions. No territorial privilege, legacy of class and tradition, gender, or status qualify its *as such* character. It would ever work to enlarge the capacity to receive it and promote the conditions pertaining to that capacity. Thus the divine empathy coincides with creativity itself. To be sensible to, embody, and act out God's suffering empathy is to have a posture that also is simply *as such*. This unrestricted empathy spreads throughout one's being

¹⁵⁷ Edward Farley, *Divine Empathy: A Theology of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 304.

¹⁵⁸ Farley, *Empathy*, 281.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Matthew 25:40.

¹⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 13:7-8b.

and orients one toward any and all need. I am saying then that Jesus has a sensibility to a divine empathy that has no qualifiers, no restrictions, and is simply *as such*.¹⁶²

This empathy without bounds, restrictions, or qualifications will be extended to the sinner. God could not simply live content that God had redeemed all things while also allowing some of God's beloved creations to experience that beauty as abject horror. Thus, God would not allow a type of hell that Manis envisions. If Manis is correct that God must make God's presence known, then it could be that sinners are unable to accept God's gift of redemption, thus disproving Inevitabilism. But because of the tenuousness of the passage he cites in support of his claim and because of God's concern for the full redemption of humanity, it seems that we do not have a good reason to believe Manis' assertion and reject Inevitabilism.

The Mercy of God and Divine Hiddenness

Manis' third premise is predicated on the assumption that in the eschaton when God draws all things to God's self, God would not be able to limit God's glory in such a way that the sinner could love God. Manis claims that it would be "psychologically impossible" for the sinner to accept the free gift of salvation.¹⁶³ There are two possible reasons why it would be psychologically impossible: either the sinner has made it so or God has made it so. We have already dealt with the possibility of rejecting God's free gift of salvation in Chapter 4. God is willing and able to outmaneuver human will in a way that does not violate free will, and yet brings about what God desires. Perhaps Manis then

¹⁶² Farley, *Empathy*, 282

¹⁶³ Manis, 3.

means that the sinner is in a position where they cannot make such a decision due to their sinfulness. But we have dealt with this possibility in Chapter 5. God could continue to allow the sinner to be capable of asking or allow the sinner's free will to deteriorate to such a degree that to violate its past disposition would not be to undermine free will. Another possibility, within the option that God makes it so that sinners cannot be redeemed, is that the sinner must make a morally significant choice to accept God's free gift of redemption. Here, this argument makes two errors. The first assumes that a legitimate decision to love God must be morally significant in a particular and requisite way. The second assumes that if such a decision did have to be morally significant in that way, that God could not make God's self hidden enough to allow the decision to be morally significant. This section will discuss the importance of morally significant actions and argue that few conversions are morally significant decisions, and then that if these decisions must be morally significant, that God could remain hidden even in the eschaton in such a way as to allow for the redemption of all who reject God's free gift.

Implicit in the thought that the damned could not accept God's free gift of salvation in God's presence is the idea that these sinners are in some way incapable of doing so. This idea must mean, however, that God is not able to accept a request for forgiveness in God's own presence, because the glory of God so overpowers the will of the sinner that they have no choice but to ask for the free gift of salvation. In this act, one might say, the sinner has not made a morally significant choice to accept God's free gift of salvation.

For this view, the only way in which the sinner could perform a morally significant act would be if God could remain hidden. But in Manis' setup, the sinner is

literally in the presence of God. The implicit premise in Manis' argument is that God could not hide God's self from a sinner who is also participating in the beatific vision, but experiences that vision as a torment. Thus, the sinner could not make a morally significant act in choosing God, since a morally significant act requires that "there not be overwhelmingly powerful incentives present in the environment which consistently coerce or otherwise force creatures to follow a particular course of action."¹⁶⁴ But if we are literally in God's presence in the afterlife, that "would provide us with overpowering incentives which would make choosing the good ineluctable for us."¹⁶⁵ God's glory serves as a powerful coercive, which could hardly be overcome (although it could presumably be rejected by those with significant motivation as discussed in Chapter 5). For sinners who would choose the right only after seeing the beatific vision do so in such a way that does not provide any merit for their actions. Thus, the logic goes, the sinner could not accept God's free gift of salvation in a morally significant way.

But to introduce the category of moral significance into the process of conversion is suddenly to undermine the very grace by which it is given. Keith DeRose speaks from the view of those who claim that those who tried to accept God's free gift of salvation after death would be unable to do so in saying, "Of course they'll confess then. It'll be so obvious that Jesus is Lord at that point. There's no merit to confessing at that point."¹⁶⁶ But against this, DeRose notes that "salvation came through God's grace alone, and not at

¹⁶⁴ Michael J. Murray, "Deus Absconditus" in *Divine Hiddenness*, ed. by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ DeRose, "Universalism."

all through the merit of the one being saved.”¹⁶⁷ This teaching has been the truth of the church through all ages, for as Thomas Aquinas explains, “no created nature is a sufficient principle of an act meritorious of eternal life, unless there is added a supernatural gift, which we call grace.”¹⁶⁸ Aquinas receives this teaching from Paul, who writes in Titus 3:5 that Jesus “saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.” We do not merit grace, but because of who God is, God gives us the free gift of salvation anyway.

The other flaw in Manis’ implicit premise is that God cannot be hidden while the sinner experiences God’s presence. Suppose that this is the case. Suppose that the sinner lives in the midst of God’s glory and experiences it in such a way that it would be hell for the individual and yet that the sinner could not choose heaven in a morally significant way because of the presence of God. Is Manis correct in asserting that God could not hide God’s self until the sinner make such a decision?

It seems that from the nature of God that God could hide God’s self in order to allow the sinner to make the decision to accept God’s free gift of salvation. Jerry Walls puts it simply: “I see no reason to assume God’s existence must be more evident after death than it is now. Surely God could reveal himself only to such an extent as would enable a free response.”¹⁶⁹ Stefan Alkier goes on to explain that one of the lessons of the appearances of God in the Gospel of Luke is that God’s location does not fit easily in creaturely categories. Alkier teaches that “God is not absent or present because absence

¹⁶⁷ DeRose, “Universalism.”

¹⁶⁸ Aquinas, *Summa*, IaIIae, q. 114, a. 2.

¹⁶⁹ Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 100.

and presence are fitting categories for his creatures but not for the creator of all.”¹⁷⁰ The logical structure of this idea is hard to comprehend because we are used to interacting with things which interact according to creaturely rules within the created world. One of the conditions of creatureliness in this life is that we interact with all things, to some degree, in a subjective manner. My experience of eating a banana is different from yours, and though we may do the same action, my particular taste buds, the neurological connections between my tongue and my brain, and my other senses may interact with the taste in a different way than you, and thus we may come to different conclusions about bananas. This example is limited, however, in the fact that we are able to describe the experience to one another in a medium that allows us a bit more objectivity in our observation by distinguishing the banana according to different categories. But it is possible that God does not interact with us in that way, or that we are incapable of thus categorizing God. As Anselm Min explains,

The radical ontological distinction between God and finite creatures makes it self-evident that we cannot expect to experience the presence of God in the same way that we experience the presence of a finite, especially material being.... God is not an object of this sort; she is above all genera and species and entirely outside the created order. We cannot, therefore, ask for the same kind of signs for the presence of God as for the presence of finite, material beings.¹⁷¹

God is not an object to be sorted into categories, and thus, we may have no way in which to limit God in order to understand God objectively. If we have no means of experiencing God objectively, then it is possible that God interacts with each of us after death according to the subjective necessity of each individual’s needs and concerns.

¹⁷⁰ Stefan Alkier, “Ways of Presence and Modes of Absence in the Gospel of Luke,” in *The Presence and Absence of God*, ed. by Ingolf U. Dalferth (Nehren, Germany: Laupp & Göbel, 2009), 54.

¹⁷¹ Anselm K. Min, “The Dialectic of God’s Presence and Absence in the World,” in *The Presence and Absence of God*, ed. by Ingolf U. Dalferth (Nehren, Germany: Laupp & Göbel, 2009), 117.

Origen thought that Jesus proved this subjective interaction to be the case in the manner in which he interacted with his followers after the resurrection. Origen wrote that “Christ becomes present in each individual to the degree that his merits have allowed.”¹⁷² Jesus remained secretive to the masses, but would take his disciples away in order to explain the lesson in his parables to them.¹⁷³ Thus Origen explains that there are “different forms of the Word, as He appears to each of those led to know Him, corresponding to their condition--the beginners, those slightly or considerably advanced, and those approaching or already in possession of virtue.”¹⁷⁴ Jesus is the embodied God, and how Jesus acted should serve as paradigm for how we expect God to act. Thus, God is capable of hiding God’s self to our subjective experience, for as “the source of our own being... God is closer to us than we are to ourselves, but as the transcendent *source* of our own being that subsists through [God’s self,] God is more distant from us than any other created being.”¹⁷⁵ God only needs to share God’s glory with us to the extent that God desires, and if God desires for the sinner to make a morally significant decision to accept the free gift of salvation, and if making a morally significant decision is required, then God could remain hidden in order for the sinner to do so.

¹⁷² Origen, *Origen and the Doctrine of Grace*, trans. by Benjamin Drewery (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), 118.

¹⁷³ Mark 4:10, 34; Matthew 13:34; Luke 8:9-10; among others.

¹⁷⁴ Origen, *Origen*, 117.

¹⁷⁵ Min, “Dialectic,” 117.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Manis' vision of hell as the experience of a sinner in the midst of the beatific vision proves an insufficient alternative to the possibility of Inevitabilism. Manis' vision does not adequately take into account the Biblical description of hell, offer a substantive reason why God would accept this situation as somehow sufficient for the redemption of all, or sufficiently argue why the sinner could not accept the free gift of salvation as some point during the afterlife. The sinner is not responsible to make a morally significant choice to accept the free gift of salvation, since no one merits grace. But even if the sinner did, then it is both in God's character and history to hide God's self from the sinner in such a way that all could find redemption. Thus, we can hold our hope for Inevitabilism.

CHAPTER 7

A Final Conclusion

I wish in writing this conclusion that I could assert that I have proven my argument to such a great degree that it was indisputably true. Since I cannot do so, I will here review my journey to this conclusion. Through the course of my research, I have come to internally realize the depth of the problem of hell for Christianity. If hell truly is a place of punishment for some people forever without the possibility of escape, then that place renders the God of the Bible virtually unrecognizable as the God of love. I myself have struggled through all of the possible alternatives, but as I began to explore the Scriptures for an answer, universal salvation came to the fore. There is a tension between passages that teach a real hell and passages that teach universal salvation. The question thus became, on which passages must we lean in order to interpret the others? I concluded that due to the nature of the way hell is discussed, it would be better to trust in God's goodness and passages that affirm God's love over those who make the problem of hell even worse. But then there had to be an explanation as to how universal salvation could be possible. I reflected on the ways in which we commonly discuss the salvation of those who have never heard of God or could not understand God's message, and realized that the way that we discussed those people virtually ignored their possibility of accepting God's free gift of salvation. Keith DeRose challenged my implicit belief that God could not extend salvation after death, and instead proved to me there is every likelihood to believe that God could and does extend the gift of salvation indefinitely. Thus, I found myself with the motivation for, the possibility of, and the method by which God could bring all to redemption.

But then there were some rather serious problems. First, it seemed that God could not violate the free will decision of those who rejected a post-mortem chance at redemption. But then I realized that God is a God of infinite resources with infinite time, and I should not suppose that God is incapable of doing anything that God has said God wills to do. My second objection, however, rested on the idea that sinners could have formed a character in such a way as to ruin their possibility of accepting the free gift of salvation. Again, however, it seems that God is a God who can do what God wants. God has at least the several options I considered, from redeeming the person to such a level as to be capable of accepting salvation or simply redeeming sinners when they have lost the capacity to practice their free will. Third, if hell was simply the experience of sinners who were in God's presence, then it seems that they could not be redeemed. But it seems like God probably recognized that, and thus did not make it the case that the unredeemed would experience God's full presence until they accepted the free gift of salvation. My personal philosophical objections were thus settled, and I found reason to hope for universal salvation.

In this work of biblically-inspired philosophy, these are the questions I sought to answer. I recognize that there are other concerns, and thus do not expect to have changed your mind dramatically. I do hope, however, that this work has helped you to consider your own thoughts on the matter and established Inevitabilism as at least within the realm of possibilities for further consideration. As my final word, I can hope for nothing more than that this thesis has convinced its skeptical readers from utter rejection to lesser doubts, and its receptive readers from wish to hope for the redemption of all humanity. In the end, I trust the God of love to do what God wants to do: redeem all human beings.

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