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Hell:

Must Hitler burn forever?

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*“If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life,
he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Revelation 20:15)*

The first Bible I received as a child depicted a radiant, grinning Jesus framed with the faces of adoring children. That is the picture of Jesus that I recall from my youth. We sang “Jesus loves me” with vigor and prayed “in Jesus’ name” before every meal. Jesus was the one you went to if you had a problem, always there to embrace you with open arms. That Jesus wouldn’t hurt a fly, but he could heal any hurt from a bruised knee to a broken heart. Conspicuously absent from view was the darker side of Jesus as the coming wrathful judge: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:12) I had no idea that gentle Jesus would one day divide the righteous from the sinners and send the latter packing with a “Depart from me, you

who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew 25:41)
Needless to say it was a shock to learn that Jesus had this decidedly darker side.

Christian kids were not always kept so thoroughly out of the loop. Indeed, they used to hear a whole lot about Jesus the Judge and the eternal hell to which he would send unrepentant sinners. Although there have been many priests, pastors and nuns well-versed at burning the fear of God into children, nobody taught the horrors of hell as effectively, and with as much aplomb, as the Catholic “Apostle to the Children,” nineteenth century evangelist Father John Furniss. Consider this excerpt from his 1861 bestselling collection of nightmarish bedtime reading, *The Sight of Hell*:

See on the middle of that red-hot floor stands a girl : she looks about sixteen years old. Her feet are bare. Listen ; she speaks. “I have been standing on this red hot floor for years! Look at my burnt and bleeding feet! Let me go off this burning floor for one moment!” The fifth dungeon is the red-hot oven. The little child is in the red-hot oven. Hear how it screams to come out ; see how it turns and twists itself about in the fire. It beats its head against the roof of the oven. It stamps its little feet on the floor.¹

And you thought Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* was a wee bit intense for the kiddies! Yet, as horrible as this is, these images of children writhing for eternity in flames and being baked in an oven are just the beginning. On page after gory page, Furniss continues the assault on the senses, presumably driven (so one must charitably assume) by the evangelistic intention of scaring the hell out of as many precocious little pipsqueaks as possible.

¹ Cited in Edward White, *Life in Christ: A Study of the scripture doctrine*, 3rd ed. (London: Elliot Stock, 1878), 60.

Many Christians today will look back with utter dismay, if not disgust, at the “ministry” of Father Furniss, believing that he accomplished little more than traumatizing a generation. That’s a pretty harsh charge. If Father Furniss were around today, how do you suppose he might reply? I bet he would say something like this:

“Emotional abuse? *‘Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.’* How cavalier you people are with your child’s eternity. And how hypocritical! If a child is in danger of playing near a scorpion’s den, a loving parent will put the fear of scorpions into her to ensure that she stays away. Well your children play every day on the very edge of the smoking pit of eternal damnation, *and you say nothing.* You should warn them that the devils are waiting to drag them into the furnace! ‘Flee hell child! Run to Jesus!’ Instead you prefer a conspiracy of silence as you teach your children about ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild.’ But make no mistake: that same Jesus will judge the universe. You residents of the twenty-first century pride yourselves on being so enlightened and humane. How ironic that is, for your ‘humane’ silence is the cruelest lie of all.”

Whatever you think of Furniss’ preaching, there is an undeniable logic to it. If a fate as horrible as hell potentially awaits every human being, then why are we Christians not more diligent about warning our children of the danger? During the H1N1 pandemic of 2009 my wife and I drilled the most rigorous hygienic procedures into our daughter (WASH your hands! USE sanitizer! DON’T LICK any doorknobs!), and all because we wanted to spare her a bad case of the flu. How much more vigilant should we be in ensuring that she avoids eternal damnation? Needless to say, if the Christian doctrine of hell is correct then hell is infinitely worse than any case of the

flu. So why does our discipleship of our children not reflect that conviction more clearly? Set against the fear of children being damned forever, Father Furniss's revivalist preaching may not be that shocking after all.

Perhaps one reason Christians are not more intentional about scaring the hell out of our kids is that we don't really believe God would consign children to such a horrendous fate. Well, maybe, and maybe not, though Christians are notoriously hazy on the so-called "age of accountability" (that ill-defined threshold between innocence and guilt after which God commands an account of sins committed). But rather than get mired in interminable debates over the potential damnation of those from toddlers to tweens, let's instead turn our attention to the fate of adults since it would seem that here at least there is no controversy: Christians widely accept that God can and does consign adults to eternal damnation. This may be so but it is not as if our moral misgivings all evaporate when we shift our gaze to the eighteen and older set. Here too there are some cases that tend to be controversial. For instance, Christians will occasionally express doubts about the damnation of a "pious pagan" like Gandhi. Could that great Hindu peacenik really be damned or might he be exempted from the flames of damnation?

Christians have debated the possible salvation of "secular saints" outside the Christian tradition, but for the sake of argument let's leave those debates to one side. Instead we will focus on those people who are the very worst specimens of humanity, and thus the very best potential candidates for damnation. The reason for this is simple: if it turns out that we cannot justify damning even *these* monsters eternally, then how much less will we be likely to consider damning the people we meet on a daily basis? So to proceed we should begin by identifying a good candidate for damnation to guide our reflection. Alas, history is full of monsters that many of us would like to see lit up like a roman candle. But rather than throw you a curve ball here, I'll

offer a rather conventional even predictable candidate for further reflection, that brute of Braunau, that animal of Austria, that hellion of humanity: Adolf Hitler. I shall argue that the notion of damning someone to eternal torment is so horrific that it appears excessive even for someone as beastly as Adolf. Obviously for most of us our concerns with hell are not primarily driven by concern for the fate of Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, or any other monster. But as I suggested, if we find the degree and intensity of suffering of one as bad as Hitler too much to bear, how much more should we be moved to rethink the doctrine when the fate concerns our friendly neighbor, trusty mechanic, and possibly even our own dearly beloved child?

That Damned Hitler: A Brief Thought Experiment

Father Furniss's descriptions of a scorching floor and a smoking oven are embarrassingly vivid and shockingly concrete for our enlightened world. But they are no more so than the images one finds in the Bible. The earliest image we find in the Old Testament comes in Isaiah 66:24 where we read of the worm that will not die and the fire that will not be quenched. As disturbing as that is, hell really comes into its own with a string of unforgettable images in the New Testament including a fiery furnace, a smoking pit, and perhaps most shockingly, a lake of fire. (More on those nightmarish images in a moment.) Down through the history of the church most Christians, both lay people and academic theologians, have interpreted these images literally. In particular, they have believed that there will indeed be, to quote Thomas Aquinas, "a real corporeal fire"² in eternity. The more reflective have added that while the fire will be *real*, it will also be somewhat different from fire as we currently know it. The key difference is that in present experience fire

² *Summa Theologica*, Supplement, 70.3, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/5070.htm>

consumes and destroys. Throw a marshmallow into a roaring camp fire and it will be gone within a few minutes. But fire in eternity will behave differently. Toss that same marshmallow into the eternal lake of fire and it will still be there in a million years, a tortured, gelatinous mass of blackened corn syrup tumbling about in the roiling flames. For that reason, fire in eternity is unimaginably worse than in the present age. Come that day, fire will no longer grant the mercy of destruction. Instead, it will only inflict terrible suffering.³

With this disturbing picture in view, let's introduce Hitler to the discussion. There he is over there, sitting on that bench, with a brand-spanking new resurrection body, a body finely-tuned to sense all the unspeakable agonies soon to be inflicted upon it. With his perishable body having taken on imperishability, it is time for that two-bit tyrant to receive his eternal comeuppance. Suddenly the imposing angel beside us speaks. "Come over here Hitler!"

Hitler looks up startled and turns to face us. "*Mich?*"

"Well who else?" the angel growls. "Yeah. *You.*"

Hitler strides over. Amazingly, he appears to be just as defiant in this life as he was in the last (though the angel's glower suggests that that's about to change). As Hitler stands there looking irritated, the angel asks us about a suitable punishment. When we demur the angel takes the lead. "Perhaps," he says, "we should afflict him with a severe case of Stevens-Johnson syndrome. What do you think?" Since we are unfamiliar with the condition, the angel takes a moment to provide us with an overview of the disease's epidemiology and symptoms: "Stevens-Johnson causes cell death which leads to the epidermis separating from the dermis. This

³ Admittedly it is also possible that the fire of hell is indistinguishable from the fire of our most blazing incinerators. In that case, the difference relates solely to the nature of the resurrection body which is made impervious even to the hottest flames.

produces excruciating pain for the victim....” After his brief medical lecture we agree that the condition sounds suitably horrific for the Austrian genocidaire. The moment we give our approval the angel declares: “So shall it be. In the name of Jesus!” Suddenly we see Hitler’s skin erupt in blistering lesions from his face down to his toes. A second later he crumples to the floor with a wail of agony. The angel adds “By the way, I added two deep, exceedingly painful corneal abrasions for good measure.” He then turns to us and orders: “Now let’s get this blasphemer off the floor.” As we heave Hitler up onto the gurney his face tightens into a tortured grimace. At that point the angel explains that Hitler’s skin has become so sensitive that merely rubbing his lips together will cause mind-numbing pain. Next the angel directs us to wrap him in layers of gauze and then tells us that it is time to leave. As we step out of the room, I glance back to see Hitler lying in helpless agony on the hospital gurney whispering curses from his cracked and bloody lips. We close the door with a click and proceed to walk over the cold linoleum floor and on down a seemingly endless hallway. The setting is eerie as moans and screams drift out from behind the heavy doors of the countless rooms that we pass by. As we go, the angel points out various stops of interest along the way. “Genghis Khan is in that room.” “That one holds your old boss.” “Remember that snarky atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell? He’s in there.”

After a walk that seems to take years, we arrive in the new creation just in time for the heavenly banquet (though I later discover that everything in the new creation is ‘just in time’). And so begins a wonderful new life of fellowshiping as the gathered saints enjoy the choicest foods and wines. Eons pass. (I mean *real* eons, those geological whoppers that each last on the order of a *billion years*.) Then one day, as we are whizzing back through the old solar system (I never get tired of interstellar flight) we realize with a jolt that the sun has now shrunk to a small hot white dwarf. “How long has it been since we were last in this neighborhood?” we ask the

angel and he replies matter-of-factly: “*Twelve billion years.*” In the stunned silence that follows we think again of Hitler for the first time in several billion years. When we ask about the tyrant, the angel suggests that we go back to check in on him. And so we travel back to hell (or what we have, to that point, assumed is hell), whizz down that endless, bleak corridor, and finally arrive back in Hitler’s room. Sure enough, there he is. Amazingly, after all this time little has changed. The room looks as we left it and Hitler is still lying in the same helpless agony, though no doubt he has shifted position trillions of times since we were last here. (Imagine those nasty bed sores.)

Then something happens quite unexpectedly. As I think about the time that has lapsed – *twelve billion years* – I am surprised suddenly to sense a twinge of compassion. Even though Hitler was a genocidal monster I begin to wonder, what is the point of keeping him here in agony? From that daring thought I quickly proceed to one which is positively dangerous. Isn’t this much suffering enough? After all, long ago God set the universe to rights, and we don’t want to be vindictive, now do we? *So why not put Hitler out of his misery and get on with the renewed creation?*

The trepidation with which this thought carefully entered my mind suggested that it was the wrong thing to be thinking. That suspicion is confirmed as I suddenly feel the angel’s eyes burning into the back of my head. With that I glance casually over my shoulder and am startled to catch the angel’s fierce glare. “So you think we’re being a bit too hard on Adolf, do you?” he says coldly. “Well for your information, hell has not even begun.” Despite my best efforts to remain casual, the angel can see that I am startled by this revelation. Apparently keen to play up my surprise, he chortles: “Wait a minute, you thought *this* was hell? You really thought this blasphemer would get away with lying on a gurney forever? For your information, this has been summer camp compared to what’s coming.” After underscoring his disappointment at my weak

constitution with a long, withering glance, the angel grabs Hitler by the shoulders. Then, without another word, he begins to shake the man violently while ripping off the ancient, crusted bandages, and sizeable chunks of flesh with them. As Hitler emits a bone-rattling cry, the angel then coolly upends the gurney, leaving the Führer to tumble with an agonizing thump onto the cold linoleum floor. Next, the angel instructs me to grip the wretch's feet while he firmly grasps the hands. Then together we carry this quivering mass of flesh, blood and pus out into the hallway.

After a long time trundling down the hall the angel suddenly directs us through another doorway. However, this one opens into a stunningly vast cavern filled with a crackling fire that extends into the distance as far as the eye can see. No, it can't be! But it is. *The Lake of Fire*. The heat is overwhelming. Even from the vantage point where I now stand, several dozen meters away from the edge, the temperature would have been sufficient to roast my pre-resurrection body. I look out into the fire and wonder, just what are those dark shadows moving in the flames? Then with horror I realize they are actually *bodies*, snapping back and forth in a hauntingly horrific show of agony.

"Now we throw him in!" the angel shouts over the roar of the flames. I continue to stand looking on in horrid fascination at the nightmarish display. "Let's throw him in!" the angel shouts again and suddenly I snap to attention. With that he initiates a macabre countdown: "Three! Two! One! In you go blasphemer!" With that we let go and Hitler goes flying through the air, arms flailing, and then tumbles headlong into the roaring flames. For a moment he is completely engulfed and I feel a tinge of hope that perhaps he might have been destroyed. (Even as I countenance the thought I see the angel throw me another disgusted look.) No such luck. In a few seconds a hand appears and then a gasping face with that unmistakable mustache. A wave of

nausea washes over me with the realization that Hitler's flesh has begun to sizzle and bubble. Then his head snaps back as he utters a long, piercing groan of agony and rage. "Now *that*," the angel says as he points with satisfaction at the wretch writhing in the flames, "is hell."

"*Good God.*" I whisper, dumbfounded.

"Yes," the angel smiles as reverent tears stream down his cheeks. "He is indeed. Hallelujah!"

Debriefing Hitler's Damnation

We can all agree that Hitler's crimes are utterly reprehensible. Consequently, if hell seems a cruel and unusual punishment when applied to the leading tyrant of the long and sordid history of humanity, how much more should it trouble us when it concerns the countless lesser specimens of human fallenness? What about that naughty child that Furniss believed could be sent to hell for sticking gum under the pew or smoking behind the rectory? What about the lesser sinners we meet every day? We would even find it disturbing if Hitler alone were the only damned soul. But how much more horrifying is it to think of the millions of more modest transgressors? For generations Christians have been taught that the fate of all those not found in Christ is conscious torment, shut out forever from the glories of heaven. But how can this be? How could Christians accept a notion of divine punishment which seems so cruel and excessive that it creates sympathy even for Hitler?

One expected reply is that the fault lies not with hell *per se* but rather with my thought experiment. In short, instead of questioning eternal conscious torment, many Christians will

dismiss my Hitler thought experiment as little more than a noxious and deeply misleading exercise in bad taste, a shameless play on soft emotions. But how so exactly? In this chapter we will consider two main objections to the thought experiment. To begin with, we will consider an objection that takes issue with the concreteness of the vision. This critic will counter that the biblical images of fire and other torments should be understood figuratively rather than literally; indeed, so the claim goes, they represent an internal, spiritual torment. If this is correct, then Hitler does not face literal flames, and once we recognize that we can see that hell is not as cruel as we might have thought. A second charge adds that, contrary to my emotional manipulation, Hitler's punishment is well deserved since he has committed sins worthy of infinite punishment. Taken together, these points allegedly show that any sympathy for Hitler reflects a failure to appreciate the true nature of hell, the depths of human depravity and the heights of God's holiness. So go the objections. However, many Christians struggle with the adequacy of these responses. In fact, later in the chapter I'll argue that the traditional Christian vision of hell is actually *more horrifying*, and thus more problematic, than my humble thought experiment alone would lead us to think.

Will Hitler *really* burn?

Let's begin with this nagging question: will Hitler burn in real bona fide flames? Certainly the concern of many readers will be that my description of Hitler's fate appears to be inexcusably grotesque and salacious. However, in my defense it should be noted that such lurid accounts of the suffering of the damned are abundant in the Christian tradition (for a great example check out Dante's literary masterpiece *Inferno*). Be that as it may, the objector continues, things have

changed. And that is true. Today theologians are much more circumspect than their forbears about engaging in speculations concerning posthumous judgment. As Edward White says in comment on the Furniss passage that I cited above: “Such representations would ... be severely reprehended by the majority of educated orthodox preachers in our own time. To them the eternal hell is of a more spiritual character...”⁴

White was writing in the late nineteenth century, but we certainly share that focus on mental, emotional, spiritual torment to the exclusion of the physical. The cynic might charge that this switch traces more to the fact that it is more palatable (and so less offensive) to a modern person than a physical fire. But there is another more compelling reason for the switch and it arises from the fact that scripture provides a surprisingly diverse collection of images when describing hell. Among these images in scripture, one finds hell described as a fire (Matthew 5:22; 6:30; 18:8-9; Mark 9:43; 9:48; Luke 3:17; Hebrews 10:27; Jude 1:7), a furnace (Matthew 13:42), weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 25:30), darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17), eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9), a cup of God’s wrath (Revelation 14:10) burning sulfur (Revelation 14:10), and a lake of burning sulfur and fire (Revelation 20:10, 15). Needless to say, it is extremely difficult to construe all these images as literal descriptions of a future reality (a fire and darkness?). Most theologians today believe instead that these various images are best understood as a variety of metaphors of future judgment. From this perspective to speculate on the literal temperature of the flames, or to debate how a person who dies toothless will gnash their teeth in hell (will dentures be provided?) is to miss the point. The point is not to provide a map of damnation but rather to offer a series of ringing warnings *to stay away from hell*. And that message comes through loud and clear.

⁴ White, *Life in Christ*, 60.

What if the torments of hell are limited to spiritual or mental suffering such that they do not involve infliction of pain on one's body? While the damned would still have bodies (more on that below), their torment would primarily be mental, emotional and spiritual rather than physical. Does this elimination of physical torment remove the offense of hell? Initially it might seem to. But I suspect that this comfort is illusory and arises primarily from our failure to grasp the full horror of mental, emotional and spiritual torment. In her memoir on depression, Sally Brampton recalls speaking with one of her friends who also struggled with depression: "'Dying,' he says, 'feels like nothing against the fear of going through another episode of severe depression. I don't think I could do it again.'"⁵ As bad as the depression of Brampton's friend may have been, one can be sure that it is simply not in the same category as the complete mental, emotional and spiritual breakdown of those facing an eternity in hell. The mind reels at trying to imagine the insufferable mental torture – hopelessness, anguish, depression, and debilitating hatred – that would consume a person facing eternal punishment. No doubt, it would be like no mental anguish the world has ever known. Samuel Hopkins describes the torture of the damned as follows:

in whatever way or degree the wicked will suffer pain by the body, it is not to be doubted that their mental pain and sufferings will be the chief part of their punishment. Indeed, such a situation and torture of their bodies as has been now mentioned, is suited to fill their minds with an amazing sense of the awful power, and the dreadful anger of God, which must occasion inexpressible mental terror, anguish, and torture.⁶

⁵ Sally Brampton, *Shoot the Damn Dog: A Memoir of Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 18.

⁶ Samuel Hopkins, *The Works of Samuel Hopkins: With a Memoir of his life and character*, vol. 2 (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Co., 1854), 65-66.

With that in mind, how satisfying is it really to say that Hitler's flesh bubbling as his body writhes in the flames are "merely" symbols of an internal torment? Does this suddenly make it just and proper that he should suffer spiritually *forever*? So even if Hitler's suffering is limited to the mental, emotional and/or spiritual realm, it would still be sufficiently horrific to give rise to feelings of compassion.

Now back to a more basic question: what reason is there to think that the suffering of the damned will be limited to mental, emotional and/or spiritual anguish? Why think that Hitler's suffering will *not* include physical torments? Even if biblical descriptions of hell are taken metaphorically, there is no reason to think that the corporeal images of suffering they describe will be limited to mental anguish. On the contrary there is good reason to believe that physical anguish will be part of the tortures. Medieval theologians recognized the point by affirming that the suffering of hell would have both a pain of loss and a pain of sense. The pain of loss is the emotional, mental and spiritual anguish that arises when people are shut out from God's presence and the community of the redeemed. But the scholastic theologians (medieval Catholic and Protestant) also affirmed the pain of sense which is rooted in physical agonies that will be inflicted on the body. As Wendelin observed, God will "preserve these bodies numerically and rack them with eternal tortures."⁷

One important reason to hold to the pain of sense arises from the oft overlooked fact that as surely as the redeemed are resurrected for life, so the damned are *resurrected for punishment* (Daniel 12:2; John 5:29). That is, it appears that God furnishes the damned with a body not least so that the person can be punished bodily. Just think about Hitler, dead in 1945, his body

⁷ Wendelin, cited in Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Compendium of Reformed Theology*, rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G.T. Thomson (1861; Reprint: London: Wakeman Trust, n.d.), 711.

cremated in 1970. Christians believe that at the future resurrection God will go through the trouble of drawing every one of Hitler's atoms back from the farthest reaches of the universe in order to facilitate his new body. And the primary if not sole reason for that reconstitution is so that Hitler may experience the eternal punishment owing to him. Even if we cannot know exactly how Hitler will experience the pain of sense, we can be sure that it will be unimaginably horrible, a fitting complement to the equally unimaginable pain of loss.

To sum up, it would appear that if anything our humble little Hitler thought experiment was *not* excessively lurid in its depiction of the pain of sense. Indeed, if anything it failed to convey the unimaginable pain of loss. Hell, we can be sure, will be far worse than my thought experiment can begin to convey

What could justify torturing Hitler *forever*?

Even if the Hitler thought experiment is not unduly sadistic or lurid, some Christians might maintain their objection because it makes God look cruel and sadistic, as if he were in the business of torturing those who reject him. On the contrary, so this hypothetical objector claims, God does *not* torture anybody in hell. Rather, they torture themselves by rejecting his loving offer of salvation. Hell is simply the result when a merciful God leaves recalcitrant sinners to their self-imposed fate.

This popular idea that hell is a self-imposed torment of one's own making certainly seems to be more in accord with our sense of justice. Unfortunately, scripture does not portray God as an active bystander in hell. In the familiar parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus describes without a blush the agony of the rich man in the flames: "So he called to him, 'Father

Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” (Luke 16:24) In this passage the rich man has been punished for ignoring the poor during his life.⁸ There is no evidence that he continues to be a rebel in hell or that his torment is somehow self-inflicted. Rather, it seems to arise exclusively from the fire into which he has been thrown. In other words, God seems to be taking an active role in punishing the rich man. Admittedly somebody could object that we are reading too much into a parable. Maybe the real point here is not to lay out the nature of future damnation but rather offer a sober warning to aid the poor and oppressed. That may be, but it is still worth noting that the *impression* of hell conveyed in the story provided no stumbling block for Jesus or his listeners as he warned about remembering the poor. The onus is on the person who wants to argue that hell is self-inflicted.

While the parable of Lazarus and the rich man leaves God’s role as judge implied, other texts are more explicit. At the close of Jesus’ parable of the ungrateful servant we read that the king turned his servant “over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.” (Mt. 18:34) The word *basanistēs* (the one who tortures) literally refers to an individual whose job is to inflict pain on another individual. (Today we might refer to the dungeon master.) Even if God is not the direct agent of torture here, he clearly is the proximate cause. As if that were not bad enough, an even more grisly message comes in Revelation 14:9-11 where we encounter an explicit description of God actively pouring out his divine wrath upon the damned:

If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full

⁸ The parable appears to be concerned with the intermediate state prior to resurrection, but presumably it reflects relationships that will be carried forward after the resurrection.

strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name

In this passage God is no shrinking violet, helplessly wringing his hands as people torment themselves. Rather, he is the agent who doles out punishment, steamrolling sinful rebels with his thundering omnipotence. Does it not follow that God is the primary agent of their suffering and that this is, indeed, torture? In order to settle this question once and for all, let's open our *Oxford English Dictionary* and read the definition of "torture": "infliction of severe bodily pain, esp. as a punishment or a means of persuasion."⁹ Hell certainly does involve God inflicting mental and physical pain on people as a means of punishment, and so based on the dictionary definition hell is God-inflicted torture.

The conclusion is inescapable. God will resurrect that damned Austrian so that he may be subjected to a higher degree of mental and physical suffering than has ever been experienced by any human being in the history of the world. And the real kicker is that it will continue *forever*. What sort of reason could God possibly have for inflicting unimaginable torture upon a human being for all eternity? In 1981 Dudley Wayne Kyzer was convicted in Alabama of a vicious triple homicide. His sentence was, for many years, the longest ever recorded in the annals of justice: two life sentences *plus ten thousand years*. That's long. One would expect that Hitler's sentence, had he lived to face justice at the Nuremberg Trials, could (and should) have been longer yet. But even the longest sentence of finite duration (e.g. a billion billion years) is still

⁹ *The Oxford American Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 2nd ed. (New York; Berkeley Books, 2001).

only the first moment of eternity. *What could possibly warrant a retributive punishment of incalculable suffering and infinite duration?*

Christian theologians have identified a couple possible responses. The first response begins by conceding that the finite sins that a human being commits in their seventy or eighty years, even those committed by a scoundrel like Hitler, would be insufficient to warrant an eternity of torture. It follows that if Hitler is to be tortured justly for eternity, it must be for an ever increasing catalogue of finite sins. To illustrate, consider this analogy. Let's say that Cletus is sentenced to fifty years in prison for killing Bobby Joe. In his first year in prison, Cletus then kills his cell mate, a crime for which he receives a second fifty year term. In his second year in prison he kills a guard and promptly receives a third fifty year term. And so it goes: every year in prison Cletus kills somebody else and adds another fifty years onto his sentence. Should Cletus live forever and continue this trend perpetually, he would never leave prison. Indeed, the longer he stays, the longer he *must* stay.

The idea is that something similar may be true of the damned. Granted, they cannot *kill* anybody in hell, but then you don't need to kill to extend your sentence. Remember the words of Jesus: "Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." (Matthew 5:22) Is it possible that somebody, once damned, could be filled with a perpetual and ever growing hatred for God and others which would lead to the accruing of new punishments every day, thereby stretching out to a potentially infinite imprisonment? This is not as speculative as you might think. After all, there is some biblical ground for viewing those in hell as continuing in hatred and rebellion. Consider Jesus' references to the gnashing of teeth in hell (Matthew 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 25:30). While this is often interpreted as signaling regret over one's loss, it more likely represents ongoing rage and rebellion. Think by comparison of the Jews who gnash their teeth in

rage against Stephen just before he is stoned (Acts 7:54). Far from being in anguish, they are enraged at his impertinence and only too anxious to begin throwing stones. So the first argument says that even if a finite life of four score and ten cannot rack up an infinite sin deserving of an infinite punishment that may not matter if one has the opportunity to sin for eternity.

A second response is also available which challenges the assumption that a finite life cannot commit sins owing eternal punishment. Granted a creature cannot earn an infinite debt if their sins are all against other creatures. That is, finite sins against finite creatures would never warrant an infinite punishment. But Christians believe that sin is ultimately and most fundamentally directed against God. Remember that when David committed adultery and murder, he prayed to God, “Against *you only* have I sinned.” (Psalm 51:4) Even though David sinned against Uriah, Bathsheba, and indeed the entire nation, he recognized that most fundamentally sin is an offense against God. As theologian Louis Berkhof argues, just as morally good actions always manifest love for God, so morally evil actions always manifest hatred for God.¹⁰ If we accept this reasoning then every sinful action can be viewed as an infinite sin against an infinite God. One need not be a genocidaire to deserve hell. Even smoking behind the rectory or sticking a wad of gum under the pew could, on this view, constitute a damnable act of rebellion.¹¹

Let’s grant that sin is, at its core, rebellion against God. Still, the arithmetic of finite sin + infinite God = infinite punishment, remains elusive. How exactly do we get from there to an

¹⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958), 232.

¹¹ In the interests of full disclosure, I should lodge some doubts here. Is it possible for finite human beings to wish for hell by way of sinful rebellion and in doing so to understand what it is they are really asking for? To illustrate the problem consider this analogy. Mike is at the bar when a man confronts him and challenges Mike to “hit him with his best shot”. Unbeknownst to this man, Mike has a bionic arm and his best shot could decapitate a person. Is it permissible for Mike to fulfill the man’s foolish request? I think not. Similarly, it is doubtful that Bon Scott (former lead singer of AC/DC) knew what he was saying when he sang about being on a “Highway to Hell”.

eternity in hell? Here's a possibility. This argument depends on a formal principle according to which the more noble an individual, the more serious the punishment owing to an offense committed against that individual. To illustrate, when a man drops a rock on an ant, the act elicits a withering glance from his colleague. Next, when the man drops a rock on a lizard this draws a disgusted comment from his colleague. Undeterred, the man drops a large rock on a sleeping dog, an act which prompts the colleague to make a righteously indignant call to the humane society resulting in a \$500 fine for animal cruelty. Finally, when the man retaliates by dropping a boulder on his meddling, moralistic colleague, he is sentenced to life in prison. The operative principle behind the growing moral indignation and punitive measures is clear: the higher the status of the creature harmed – from ant to lizard to dog to human colleague – the more significant the punishment that justice requires. With that in mind we might wonder what punishment is owing to an offense against an infinite God. Does not such a crime require a punishment which is likewise infinite? And since finite mortals cannot suffer a punishment of infinite intensity, perhaps the only option remaining is that we be subjected to a finite degree of suffering for an infinite amount of time.

Admittedly this “status argument” has some intuitive plausibility. Nonetheless, I find that plausibility dissipating when we invoke it to justify the eternal conscious torment of hell. After all, it implies that any sin, from Hitler's genocide to David's adultery and murder down to Fred's stealing paper clips from work, is equally a sin against God deserving of eternal torture. Come on. *Stealing paper clips*? This just doesn't seem to be a slight against God that is worthy of eternal damnation. But never mind stealing paper clips: are terrible sins like adultery, murder, or even genocide worthy of *eternal* suffering? And even if everybody from Fred to Adolf *were* indeed deserving of damnation, does it necessarily follow that an infinitely loving and merciful

God would exercise his rights in this regard? Wouldn't an outright annihilation be more compassionate? What internal necessity is it that obliges God to retain his suffering creatures in existence?

While compassionate annihilation seems a more reasonable response to human sin than eternal suffering, the primary objection to this status argument is simply that the notion of a purely retributive punishment of torture is completely out of whack with modern notions of justice. To see what I mean, let's imagine that Hitler survived World War 2 and lived to be the star defendant at the Nuremberg Trials. After the trial of the century, Hitler is sentenced for his crimes against humanity. Which of these three judgments do you suppose would accord more readily with our sense of the justice owing to Hitler?

Judgment 1: Hitler shall be hanged from the gallows.

Judgment 2: Hitler shall be enclosed in a custom fit iron maiden for a period of two days during which time various spikes, nails and knives shall be driven into his body so as to inflict an excruciating degree of suffering. At the end of this period, Hitler shall be removed and hanged from the gallows.

Judgment 3: Hitler shall be given an immortality pill after which he shall be enclosed in a custom fit iron maiden for a period of eternity during which time various spikes, nails and knives shall be driven into his body so as to inflict an excruciating degree of suffering.

Ethicists, jurists and laypeople today continue to debate the morality of capital punishment as described in Judgment 1. Some will believe death a fitting punishment while others will consider it cruel and inhumane, even for the likes of Hitler. But there is no such debate about our other two options. Judgment 2 will not even be on the radar as a possibly just punishment for the

simple reason that we do not, under any circumstance, consider torture to be a humane punishment.¹² And as for Judgment 3, I would suggest that absolutely no properly functioning and moral member of society could possibly give the nod to that torture. (Perhaps some of Hitler's victims would opt for Judgment 2 or 3, but those victimized are not always the best judges of what justice requires.)

Here's the bottom line: we left the idea of torturing people as a means of punishment behind when we retired medieval devices of torture like the iron maiden, pear of anguish, and the rack. Today we look at such tragic devices as sad relics from an earlier, more brutish age. The point of offense is directed not only at the exquisite creativity by which these objects inflict torture, but in the very notion of inflicting torture to begin with. The idea of reintroducing punitive torture to contemporary jurisprudence is about as likely to find success as the reintroduction of slavery or wartime genocide. True, such moral horrors as slavery and genocide occasionally happen but we recognize them as horrors and surely don't enshrine them into our best practices. The same goes for retributive torture. As a result, you can bet that significant cognitive dissonance arises when it is proposed that punitive torture is the premiere way that a God of infinite love deals with his rebellious subjects.

The defender of hell objects: "If Hitler continues to rage against God, what is the deity to do? Must he put up with rebellious humans?" Certainly not. But there is an irony here, for if God imprisons Hitler because the rebellious Austrian forever shakes his fist at divinity then God *is*, in at least one sense, putting up with Hitler. And this leads us to the more basic issue for even if we conceded that justice is consistent with an enemy's eternal torture, what about the infinite divine

¹² Ethicists debate the morality of torturing a person for a reason other than punishment. For instance, is it ever moral to torture a terrorist in order to gain information that might save lives? Whatever we conclude on that question (though I suspect most ethicists and certainly most jurists reject torture here too), I know of no ethicist who commends torturing terrorists purely for the sake of retribution.

compassion? I'm not sure about the case to be made for euthanasia of a life in this present mortal coil, but wouldn't a merciful God who encountered a human will that preferred cursing to bowing have good grounds to deliver a shot of potassium chloride or a bullet to the head (or, more simply, just say "Stop existing!") rather than resurrecting the rebel to face an eternity of punitive torture? (More on this question in chapter seven.)

Will the saints *rejoice* as Hitler burns?

The picture appears pretty ugly thus far. But it is about to get a lot uglier as we turn to consider the reaction of the redeemed saints to all this torture. In the Bible we read that the denizens of God's redeemed world will experience no more death, mourning, crying or pain (Revelation 21:4). The contrast between their bliss and the agony of the damned could not be greater. This immediately raises a disturbing question: how can perfectly redeemed people be experiencing a wonderful life of unimaginable pleasure while many people they had once known and loved are being subjected to the most excruciating torture? We will seek to address this question by briefly considering two responses: either the redeemed will be ignorant of the damned, or they will find pleasure in their suffering.¹³

According to the first response people in the new heavens and earth will be unaware of the suffering of those in hell. In terms of finding a text to support this view, your best bet might be Isaiah 65:17: "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind." Could it be that those in heaven will have such a

¹³ In *Faith Lacking Understanding* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 150-59, I consider four possible responses to this dilemma: ignorance, indifference, anguish and joy.

wonderful life that they will not even recall the sinful people left behind, let alone be aware of their ongoing damnation?

Unfortunately, this “out of sight, out of mind” approach to hell is really no solution at all. To begin with, it implies that heaven is only possible because its residents are kept unaware of the horrific suffering elsewhere in God’s great economy. This is kind of like saying that the tourists at a beach resort are able to have a great time only because they are unaware of the agony of the shantytown just beyond the high walls enclosing the compound. Not surprisingly, it is difficult to square this with Paul’s statement that “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12) How can we be in a state of knowing fully when we are at the same time blinded to the agonies of millions if not billions of damned sinners, perhaps including our parents, second child, and three of our grandchildren? This seems to reduce heaven to little more than a Precious Moments illusion.

Even more fundamentally, this ignorance view does not address the fact that *God* will both know about the suffering of the wicked, and indeed will be the primary *cause* of their torture, at least with respect to the pain of sense. Obviously God cannot be ignorant of the punishment he is exercising. But if he is at least aware of it, does he grieve over the punishment? Ezekiel 18:23 would suggest as much: “‘Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?’ declares the Sovereign LORD. ‘Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?’” At the very least, it would seem that God takes no pleasure in their fate. So we must ask how much grief there can be before heaven is no longer heaven.

It may be that this image of suffering over the lot of those in hell is not the final word. And this brings us to our second option. Incredibly, there is good reason to think that the torturous punishment of hell actually will be a source of *pleasure* both for God and the redeemed saints. If hell represents God at last righting the scales of justice once and for all, then it could be that Christians will *relish* that judgment, much like a young boy would relish his burly older brother rendering a just judgment on the school bully that has long tormented him. Nor is this a mere speculation. In fact, one finds ample testimony in scripture for this theme of people delighting in the exercise of God's judgment upon the wicked. Psalm 5:5 declares that God hates those who do wrong, and by implication that the righteous should hate them as well. Elsewhere the psalmist relishes the thought of God pouring out punishment upon his enemies. (See for instance Psalm 69:22-28 and 109:7-20.) This same theme of the righteous rejoicing in the punishment of the wicked is present in Revelation:

“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” And again they shouted: “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.” (19:1-3)

If the punishment of the “great prostitute” includes rebellious sinners, then the saints shall consider the judgment and wrath exercised by God upon the ungodly to be a cause for praise, with the “Hallelujah” roughly approximating a “Yahoo! Way to go God!”

A similar picture is present in Revelation 6:9-10. When discussing this passage in his commentary on Revelation, William Barclay quotes Tertullian, a theologian of the early third

century, who anticipates the punishment awaiting the persecutors of the church with shocking sadism:

You are fond of spectacles; expect the greatest of all spectacles, the last and eternal judgment of the universe. How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs, and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer flames than they ever kindled against the Christians; so many sage philosophers blushing in red hot flames with their deluded scholars; so many celebrated poets trembling before the tribunal, not of Minos, but of Christ; so many tragedians more tuneful in the expression of their own sufferings; so many dancers writhing in the flames.¹⁴

Tertullian's language may offend our sensibilities but the theological idea behind it seems to be well attested. Many other theologians have agreed that the saints will not be ignorant of the suffering of hell but rather will delight in it. As Thomas Aquinas put it (mercifully with less salacious detail than Tertullian), "the saints will rejoice in the punishment of the wicked, by considering therein the order of Divine justice and their own deliverance, which will fill them with joy."¹⁵ And many other theologians have agreed. (For further supporting biblical texts see Isaiah 66:24 and Revelation 14:9-11.)

With this unbelievably grim picture in view it now becomes clear that our account of Hitler's final state may have sidestepped the most disturbing dimension of all. Thus it is time to revisit the ending of our thought experiment for a sober retooling. With that in mind, let's rejoin our damnation of Hitler in progress:

¹⁴ Tertullian cited in William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Revelation of John*, vol. 2, Chapters 6-22, rev. ed. (Burlington, ON: Welch, 1976), 12.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, supplement, 94.3, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/5094.htm#article3>

“Let’s throw him in!” the angel shouts again and suddenly I snap to attention. Then he initiates a macabre countdown: “Three! Two! One! In you go blasphemer!” With that we let go and Hitler goes flying through the air, arms flailing, and then tumbles headlong into the roaring flames.

Now remember that in the original account I was both saddened and sickened by this display. Since this does not appear to be consistent with the texts that support the saints delighting in the punishment of the wicked, let’s revise our description accordingly:

Immediately a chorus of praises erupts from the saints gathered to watch the unfolding spectacle. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is there and Maximilian Kolbe too, as well as millions of other saints, victims of the Nazi regime whose blood is now being avenged. Led by worship leaders Brian Doerksen and Charles Wesley, together they sing: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great tyrant who corrupted Europe with his damned ideology. He has avenged on Hitler the blood of his servants.”

We all wait for the day when the scales of justice are leveled and the world is put to rights. But does this righting mean that we will find it pleasurable to watch God inflict tortures on these wretches as they dance in the eternal flame? We are told that beholding the tortures of those damned to hell will be, for the saints, a wondrous, holy, and praiseworthy show. So why does it look just plain vindictive?

Some contemporary theologians continue to speak out in defense of this picture of the saints delighting in divine retribution. The replies tend to go something like this:

True this looks bad, but keep in mind that we are terribly fallen creatures. The fact is that we simply fail to comprehend the depth of human sin and the offense that it poses to God's holiness. But when we are made perfect we will find this torturous punishment a glorious thing indeed.

Still, many others will find this assurance to be less than assuring. Could it really be that a perfected Christian will be one who delights in the suffering of the wicked? From this perspective one faces new interpretive possibilities for Paul's promise to the Corinthians: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9). For generations this passage has encouraged Christians with the indescribable pleasures of heaven. Could it really be that one of those pleasures could be box seats to witness the torture of the damned?

From Hitler to a wayward daughter

I started off talking about Hitler for a very important reason. If it seems impossible to conceive the justice of this tyrant being damned eternally, then how much more would we be troubled by the notion that such a fate could befall our coworkers, neighbors and even our children? It is now time to return to that more familiar ground by considering the fate of people a little closer to home. So let's talk some more about children, though in this case we will avoid begging any questions or courting unnecessary controversy by considering the damnation of a grown child. Imagine that you have a twenty-five year old daughter named Lizzie. She is a wonderful girl, the light of your life, gentle and caring and very bright. Over the years she has volunteered at the Humane Society and fostered many abused animals, carefully rehabilitating them and making

them fit for adoption. Now she is realizing her dream by studying to be a veterinarian. A few weeks ago Lizzie took you out for coffee and told you that she simply cannot believe “that Christianity stuff” any longer. Though her decision has hurt you deeply, she really seems to have struggled over the decision and drawn her difficult conclusion with much sadness. She also appears to have drawn her conclusions with more thoughtfulness and integrity than most people you know who sit in the pews every Sunday morning. Anyways, regardless of her religious convictions (or lack thereof), you still love her dearly. With or without the title “Christian” she remains a gentle, loving spirit and your parental bond is unchanged by this difficult news.

Then a few days later, while on her way home from the battered woman’s shelter where she volunteers, Lizzie is hit and killed by a drunk driver. In this moment ivory tower speculations about the cruelest despots of history are a faint memory as you are consumed with agony over questions of your beloved Lizzie’s fate. Will she really be resurrected by God someday for the simple purpose of being subjected to an eternity of unimaginable torture? The question weighs heavily on your soul and your pastor’s lame assurance that God will always act justly is little comfort. One dark afternoon as you sit weeping for your lost daughter a friend quotes the promise of a time when every tear shall be wiped away. The friend meant well, but how can your tears ever be wiped away if your daughter really is subjected to unimaginable eternal agonies? Needless to say the notion that you could *delight* in her damnation is too disgusting and horrifying to enter the horizon of your thoughts. And perhaps it is a good thing too. What doctrine could be so cruel as to drive such an unthinkable wedge between a parent and their beloved child? Whether we have experienced the unimaginable loss of a child or not, every one of us ought to think through our understanding of hell in accord with the possible fates of those we love as well as those we loathe.

After the storm

Nobody said weathering these storms would be a simple matter. Entire walls have been blown apart and sea water littered with debris has inundated surrounding fields. But the sun is breaking through and the rains are subsiding. So now we must ask, how best to rebuild?

Our first option is to build the same walls but do so with greater care and attention to structural integrity. And this requires an honest confrontation with the limitations and challenges of this traditional fortification. As we have seen, the mainstream tradition affirms that God resurrects the unregenerate to face an eternity of unimaginably horrific retributive torture of mind and body. We can accept this if we so choose, but we should admit at the outset how disturbing, counterintuitive and incomprehensibly ugly this picture looks. And yet, as hopeless as this picture may seem, there arguably is a way to fortify this rampart against the most fearsome storms and that is to recognize that our objections and misgivings are held by fallen human beings with distorted perspectives on this side of eternity. Thus one can always rebuild on the notion that we simply lack an adequate understanding of the holiness of God and the horror of human sin to understand the logic, indeed necessity, of the doctrine of hell. Along with this would come the promise that once we are fully conformed to the image of Christ we will see how hell is nothing less than the most judicious and praiseworthy response to human rebellion. There is much more to be said for rebuilding along these traditional lines but here I'll simply note the not-to-be-overlooked fact that this is arguably the most plausible way to read the biblical witness on hell.

Some Christians will find these reflections sufficient to warrant rebuilding along traditional lines. But other Christians will not be satisfied. From their perspective, this storm will have been so devastating that rebuilding in the traditional way is simply not an option any longer. From this dissenting perspective, the problem is not that we *can't* see how hell *can* be consistent with God's love but rather that we *can* see that it *can't* be. For those who conclude that the problems with eternal conscious torment are too great to bear, there are two alternative ways to rebuild by revising our understanding of hell. In closing I'll briefly summarize these two alternative blueprints.

The first blueprint is annihilationism, the view that God will resurrect the lost to face a judgment that results in their complete destruction or annihilation. Hell exists, it is horrible, but it is only for a period of time, and after that period creation can move toward healing and that fullness that God intended from the beginning of time. The annihilationist builds his case by pointing to a number of texts that suggest the destruction of the wicked including Psalm 37:10 and Matthew 10:28. In addition, the view draws on theological criticisms of the traditional view of eternal conscious torment, some of which have been surveyed in this chapter. Annihilationism has gained significant popularity in recent years, having been espoused by a growing number of respected theologians like Clark Pinnock and John Stott as well as the Church of England's influential 1995 doctrinal commission.¹⁶ Thus, for those so inclined it seems to me that there is much promise in seeking to rebuild the dikes along annihilationist lines.

The second blueprint, a more controversial one to be sure, is universalism, the view that eventually everyone will be saved. At the outset we need to distinguish the doctrine in view here

¹⁶ Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England, *The Mystery of Salvation: The Story of God's Gift* (Morehouse, 1996).

from heretical forms of universalism including the pluralist form that says all religions are vehicles of salvation and the namby-pamby view that denies the existence of hell altogether. The doctrine of our concern is quite different as it builds on the reconciling work of Christ (*pace* the pluralist) and the purifying role of hell (*pace* the namby-pambyist). According to this doctrine, what some have called *evangelical* universalism,¹⁷ all people will eventually be reconciled to God *through the atoning work of Christ* (Colossians 1:20). However, since not all come to Christ in this life, hell exists not for the purpose of retribution but rather to bring about repentance and reformation until the point when everyone freely confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:11). Thus, the end goal of hell is the restoration of all things so that God may be in all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Evangelical universalism boasts its own minority tradition from Gregory of Nyssa, a pillar of orthodoxy in the fourth century, down to Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple in the twentieth. As such, one might hope to find the materials here to rebuild a strong wall against the various tempests. Personally, I remain unconvinced by the universalist's convictions as I find that the weight of the texts, and the formidable traditions that have read those texts, seem to point toward the eternal damnation of some as the most likely outcome. But even if I do not share the universalist's *conviction* in the salvation of all, I do share their *hope* for the salvation of all. Does this make sense? Let me explain what I mean. If you purchase a lottery ticket (which of course you wouldn't, but let's say you did) you would do so with the hope, *but not the expectation*, that you would win. One might take an attitude like this toward universalism. Even if you agree with me that we lack an adequate biblical and theological case to count universalism a conviction or expectation, there could be enough to be said in its favor biblically and theologically to maintain

¹⁷ See for instance Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Cascade, 2006).

it as a reasonable hope. Perhaps then a person could include a “hopeful universalist’s spillway” as we construct our dikes of eternal conscious torment or annihilation.

So it is time to rebuild the walls, fill in the holes, and pump out the inundating sea water as we prepare for more storms to come. We can build along the traditional lines while accepting our limitations of understanding. We can rebuild a wall that allows for the destruction of the lost. And possibly we can even build in light of the hope that one day all may be saved. But however we construct our dikes, we can all find protection from the fiercest gales and crashing waves with the peaceful assurance of this shared confession: “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25)

Questions for Further Discussion

1. Do you believe that the notion of hell as eternal conscious torment is in tension with God’s attributes of love, mercy and justice?
2. What do you believe is the sin for which people are damned?
3. Do you believe that people will continue to rebel against God in hell? If so, then how do you explain the implication of peace and universal reconciliation in passages like Phil. 2:11 and Col. 1:20?
4. Is the doctrine of hell consistent with our call to love our enemies?
5. Do you think that people in heaven will be aware of the suffering of hell? If so, then do you believe they will rejoice in it?
6. Do you think that hell appears to be a problem because we fail to understand the depths of sin and the height of God’s holiness?
7. Do you find hopeful universalism to be a viable position?