

**HEALING HEREAFTER**



**Finding Rational and Refreshing Answers  
for Why We're Here  
and Where We're Headed**

**Jason Dykstra, MD**



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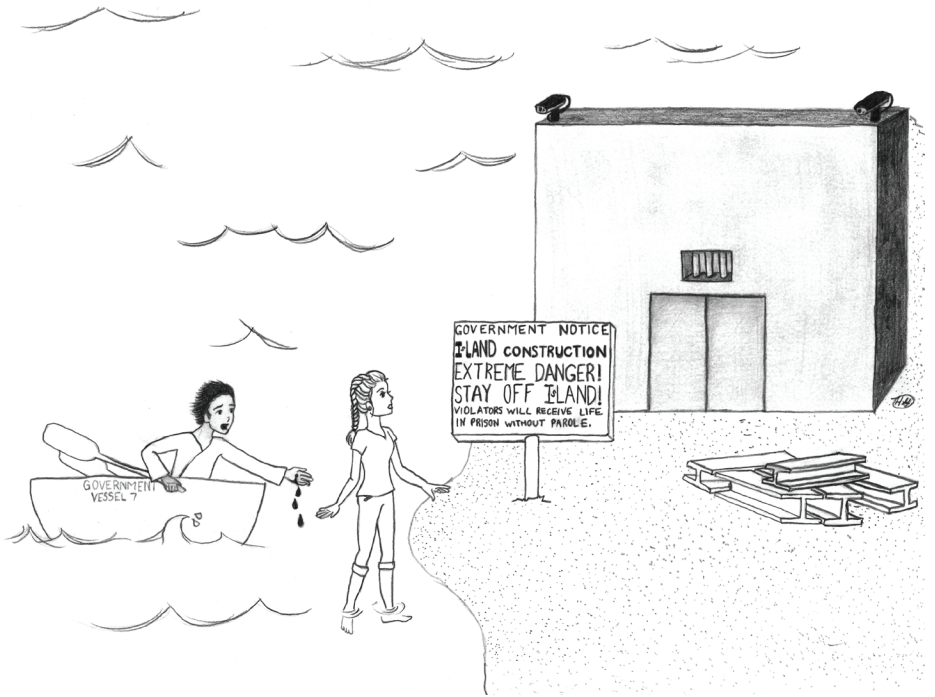
*For everyone who wonders  
what the hereafter has in store for us,  
and especially for those who want to know why*

*With deep gratitude and love  
to my Savior, spouse, and sons,  
who all significantly gave of themselves  
to make this possible*

## **Booklet 7**

### **Beyond the Point of No Return**

*Questions about the purpose of Hell  
and how it is reconciled with God's forgiving and restoring nature*



## *HEALING HEREAFTER*

The hardest part about being a doctor is having to care about some people's health more than they care about it themselves. And emergency and family physicians experience this difficulty far more than I do as a radiologist. Obviously, many patients are very concerned about their health and make very serious and difficult life changes to optimize it. But there are also a large number of folks who demonstrate no regard at all for the state of their body, and it shows in all kinds of ways, often unfortunately in a premature demise.

You might be wondering why we doctors aren't just OK letting these people go. It's their life to live and their choice to make, so don't worry about it, right? To an extent, I see your point, and there have been times when I wished I could have thrown in that towel more easily, trust me. But remember that a person's decisions about their own health will almost always affect others around them. Whether these choices create situations where a parent or spouse is unduly burdened, where a dependent suffers disease or neglect, or where a baby is denied a healthy start, no decision made about one's health is done so in a vacuum, and others affected may be our patients too. Not to mention that people who become doctors do so because they value helping people be healthy. We're wired to care about people's health, even when they don't, for better or for worse. And unlike most of our patients, we've seen hundreds and hundreds of cases of what happens down the road when people neglect their health—and it ain't pretty. We are exposed, in some ways much more than



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they are, to the pain, suffering, and low quality of life that such patients are usually headed for, which gives us the impetus that they might not have to do something about it.

This was my motivation when I met a patient in her forties with diabetes. Her foot was dying, generating a source of infection that was spreading up her leg. Amputation was discussed, as was simple antibiotic therapy. She was well-informed, mentally competent, and refused both treatments. Not because she was afraid, holding out for a miracle, or had any other objection she was willing to reveal to us. Just because, as far as we could tell. Day after day our whole team assessed her mental status and urged her to accept treatment but got the same reply. Eventually we had to inform her that the infection would inevitably spread to her bloodstream and soon threaten her life. Same reply. It was bewildering and frustrating to say the least! But after trying everything we could think of multiple times to convince her of the urgency of her predicament, we finally had to concede that she was going to make her own decision in the end. We still kept trying, but the only way her leg—let alone her whole body—was going to be restored was if she chose that for herself and did so before she was beyond the point of no return.

Concerning our eternal health, the Bible conveys a similar urgency and a point of no return when restoration is no longer an option, both of which some have called into question. This booklet explains why and assesses whether or not heeding such biblical warnings is truly vital . . .

1

In Booklet 6 we discussed four of the five concepts that relate to how long people would be in Hell. The final concept connected to Hell's longevity is the purpose of Hell itself. Is it for eternal punishment, for correction or refinement, for something else entirely, or for a combination of these goals? Although an answer to this question would not definitively prove Hell to be forever or not, it would certainly cause us to lean one way or the other. Moreover, it might help us understand how God could defensibly and sensibly include such a place in his hereafter to begin with. For many, the obvious and only purpose of Hell is eternal retribution. This belief partially arises from the Bible, where punishment is clearly a part of what's going on in Hell (Matthew 25:46, Jude 1:7). However, the degree to which punishment is viewed as the purpose of Hell also depends greatly on a person's upbringing, how comprehensive her knowledge of the Bible is, how strongly she believes she may or may not be going there, and her feelings toward those she considers to be headed there. The motives for Christians to preach a Hell of wrath and vengeance alone are often not admirable, and it is imperative to consider what other purposes God is accomplishing with this place.

For example, we've learned in Booklet 2 why Hell is not an arbitrary realm of retribution where God throws people to satisfy his eternal temper tantrum. Rather, it's a place people *want* to go to, proven by their lifelong words and deeds, a place they have consistently chosen for themselves. Any punishment associated with Hell is no more or less than the consequence of their desire to live apart from God and perfect community with him, and it exists because it must if God is to give humans the choice to live *with* God in perfect community with him! Another proposed purpose of Hell is not so much to punish a person, but to correct or refine him, using Hell as an institution of reform to "melt every hard heart," so that "even the most 'depraved sinners' will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God."<sup>1</sup> This part of the book will explore whether or not this

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purpose for Hell is biblically valid, and the first step in doing so is to figure out if the punishment, wrath, and judgment warned about in the Bible even refers to Hell at all. Certainly the eternal punishments described in Matthew 25:46 and Jude 1:7 aren't consistent with temporary correction, but what about other references to "the coming wrath"? Let's find out!

By the time of Jesus, the Romans had long taken over Israel. There were several things about this that made the Jews grumpy. Here and there, some particularly ambitious fellow would start a rebellion, and the Romans would suppress it. Certainly, there was tension between the two people groups. In light of this, the argument has arisen that Jesus' continual warnings about punishment refer to the Romans finally getting peeved enough to really let the Jews have it, which they do in AD 70, when Jerusalem and its temple are burned. "When he warns of 'the coming wrath,' then, this is a very practical, political, heartfelt warning to his people to not go the way they're intent on going. The Romans, he keeps on insisting, will crush you."<sup>2</sup> This idea seems reasonable, or at least possible, except for one tiny problem. Jesus never makes this particular warning. Not once does he use the quoted phrase "the coming wrath." John the Baptist? Twice. Paul? Once. Jesus? Not a single time. In fact, the word "wrath" only gets two mentions from Jesus at all. One of them involves a *complete* destruction of the temple obviously during the apocalyptic events associated with Jesus' second coming (Luke 21:23). When the temple was razed in AD 70, much of it still stood, as some of it does even today. It is only when we "will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" when "not one stone will be left on another" in the temple (Luke 21:5-28). Jesus also applies wrath to "whoever rejects the Son," explaining that they will not see eternal life (John 3:36). So ironically, not only does Jesus *never* refer to "the coming wrath" of imminent Roman retaliation; *every* mention he does make of wrath refers to the final judgment of the unsaved.\*

So the biblical context in which the phrase "the coming wrath"

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\* Moreover, this is consistent with what John and Paul described "the coming wrath" to be as well, as detailed here.<sup>3</sup>

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is used does not allow us to separate it from Hell. OK fine, but could such retribution in Gehenna occur for a reason other than punishment? Can the “punishment” described in the Bible refer to anything besides a sentence or penalty? The Greek word translated “punishment” in the New Testament is *kolasis* (the noun form) or *kolazo* (the verb form). In *Strong’s Greek Lexicon* the definitions for *kolasis* are “punishment and torment.”<sup>4</sup> In *A Greek-English Lexicon* we find “checking the growth of trees, chastisement, correction, and punishment.”<sup>5-6</sup> And at [greekbible.com](http://greekbible.com) we’re given “correction, punishment, and penalty.”<sup>7</sup>

From the argument for a temporary, corrective Hell, we are also offered the unreferenced meaning “pruning or trimming of the branches of a plant so it can flourish,”<sup>8</sup> which is presumably derived from a dictionary definition similar to “checking the growth of trees.” It is argued that if you “correct” a plant by lopping some of it off, you are hoping the correction will improve the lot of the plant overall; therefore, if God corrects you in Hell, maybe it’s all for improving your overall lot later in Heaven. The problem here is that only the one horticultural definition for *kolasis/kolazo* is assumed to be the right one, with no supporting evidence. It would be more honest and objective to say “*kolazo can be* a term from horticulture,” referring to pruning, than to claim that “*kolazo is* a term from horticulture.”<sup>9</sup> I know this is subtle, but don’t miss what’s happening here. If the term *kolasis/kolazo* is solely derived from horticulture, then the correcting or pruning definition would be the default one. If the majority of definitions are not associated with horticulture—which is clearly the case—then we’re going to consider all definitions equal and decide among them based on context. So which definition of *kolasis/kolazo* does the contextual evidence support?

In the parable of “The Sheep and the Goats,” Jesus gathers “all the nations” on judgment day and then separates them into “sheep” and “goats” (Matthew 25:31-46). The sheep (“the righteous”) go straight to God’s Heavenly kingdom for eternal life, and the goats (“who are cursed”) “go away to eternal punishment” (*kolasis*). To avoid making an assumption about the meaning of this word ourselves, we need more evidence to decide between the correction/horticultural option

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and the punishment/torment option. Which is the most likely? In the context of this parable, Jesus makes it easy. He uses a second term to describe the goats' fate besides "eternal *kolasis*." In 25:41 he states, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire." Jesus is crystal clear that *kolasis* involves fire in this passage. Now we see why jumping right to the horticultural definition was a mistake. How often do you use fire to prune your shrubbery? Being the borderline pyromaniac that I am, I use gasoline to start *all* of my bonfires, and I even created a 12 foot tall mountain of flame in my own lawn once to clear a space for, that's right, a firepit! I'm not gonna lie, it was pretty awesome, no matter what my wife will tell you. But not even I have attempted to torch any of my vegetables or flowers to help them "flourish." There is no corrective role for fire in your garden, nor is there one for those in Hell. To lead us to the most likely option then, Jesus is plain that "eternal *kolasis*" means "eternal punishment." He's obviously not using such strong language just to "put in a bit of mayhem to underscore (*his*) points," as one proponent of a transient Hell claims.<sup>10</sup> That would mean Jesus' "eternal life" is merely a mischievously false tease too then, right? No, we know from our discussion in Booklet 6 on *aion*, as well as from the one we've just wrapped up on *kolasis/kolazo*, that those in Heaven and in Hell will be in these places forever (Revelation 14:11, 20:10). I'm with you; Hell is a terrible truth, but it's one we need to understand and understand correctly.

## 2

**A**lrigh, we know that there are problems prematurely assuming a transient, corrective connotation for *kolasis/kolazo* in relation to Hell, but isn't the Bible full of references to God bringing people through a time of difficulty for the purpose of restoration? Of course, but do any of them refer to the punishment as Hell? No. Do any of them refer to the restoration as a transfer from Hell to Heaven? No. Instead, the difficulty is always an earthly form of punishment, such

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as being conquered, rejected, or exiled, and the restoration either always begins or is complete before a person reaches Hell or Heaven. Well of course, why would God wait until people are in Hell to melt their hard hearts if they could have benefited from such correction much earlier? In fact, if God is going to truly restore everyone to Heaven no matter what, then why does he even need Hell? Why can't he give even the most resistant people the pruning they will require to repent here on earth? Conjure up the most horrible type of suffering you can imagine in Hell. God could make that happen here too, couldn't he? If he will inevitably bring us to the breaking point in Hell, he can do it in this life too, so a Hellish correctional facility would be simply an unnecessary extra step in our restoration. For all these reasons, if the word "restored" is applied to people in a verse, there is no justification for automatically inferring that they're being transferred to Heaven after being corrected in Hell. Neither is there reason to infer that God engages in that kind of restoration, especially when it contradicts so many of his words and forces him to violate or manipulate humanity's free choice to exist apart from God. This will be confirmed as we explore such passages, questioning specifically what people were restored from and what the restoration brings. The respective answers are never both Hell and Heaven. Most of them refer to God restoring various groups of Jews from exiles to various countries that had conquered them. In four of them, God rescues people who have not repented of sin, also at odds with a corrective Hell, which eventually requires people to "give up their resistance and turn to God" to be restored from Hell to Heaven (Jeremiah 5:3-19, 32:30-41, Lamentations 3:31-42, Amos 9:1-12).<sup>11</sup> Let's see what else we learn about the kinds of restoration God demonstrates.

We'll start with the most interesting example, both because it involves restoring the baddest of the bad and because it brings together several important concepts we've learned so far. Sodom and Gomorrah. Even those not familiar with the Bible at all have likely heard of them, #1 and #2 on the "Most Evil Cities" list, making Las Vegas look like a utopian countryside hamlet. Well, back in Abraham's time, upon going to visit his nephew Lot, Abraham is told that from those oppressed by these cities "the outcry against Sodom and

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Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous” (Genesis 18:20). God sends two angels who confirm this and are therefore authorized by him to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah to relieve the oppressed (Genesis 19:12-13). Because Lot and his family live in Sodom, Abraham plays *Let’s Make A Deal* with God and negotiates a pretty sure bet: God won’t go through with his plan if there are at least ten righteous people in the city, and Lot’s family counts for four. Six more righteous people in an entire city. That’s all he needed. Things are looking OK. But as night falls, we are given a horrific example of the great evil that goes on in this city, and the prospects darken. Read it if you’d like (Genesis 18:16-19:29). Abraham wakes the next morning to find “burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah” and “dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.” God does rescue Lot and his daughters, and the angels make repeated efforts to save as many as possible, even though neither of these acts were required in the bargain (Genesis 19:12-29). But as everyone else died, apparently no other righteous folks were present, or God would have saved more.

But that’s not the last of these cities we hear about in the Bible. In Ezekiel 16:44-63, God reveals that he will “restore the fortunes” of Sodom, that they “will return to what they were before.” Some assume this to mean that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah will be successfully rehabilitated via their punishment in Genesis, via doin’ time in Hell, or via both, after which they will join everyone else in Heaven. “What appeared to be a final, forever, smoldering, smoking verdict regarding their destiny..wasn’t? What appeared to be over isn’t.”<sup>12</sup> Could this restoration refer to the restoration of a temporary corrective Hell? Whether it could or not, the promise that Sodom will “return to what it was before” is a bit confusing. Every single reference to Sodom in the Bible is to an evil place. We have no biblical reason to believe it was ever remotely good. We also know the restoration of Sodom refers to the people of the city rather than the city itself, because in at least four places we are told that it will never be inhabited again (Isaiah 13:19-20, Jeremiah 49:18, 50:40, Zephaniah 2:9). But returning the people of Sodom to “what they were before” their destruction came—really, really evil—does not seem like something God would ever want to do, especially if the purpose of this restoration was to remove their

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sin so they could eventually be in Heaven.

Fortunately, the New Testament offers further clarification. The final biblical words on Sodom and Gomorrah are quite difficult for proponents of a transient, corrective Hell to explain. *Love Wins*, for example, chooses not to address them at all. In 2 Peter 2:6-9 we learn that God “condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.” Peter elaborates, “These people are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them” (2 Peter 2:17). Jude concurs, “And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 1:6-7). No wiggle room there. The Bible’s last commentary on Sodom and Gomorrah mandates “the punishment of eternal fire.”

From the confirmation we find in Jude then, we can safely conclude that Ezekiel 16 is not promoting some type of corrective, temporary Hell for Sodom and Gomorrah. So how are their fortunes restored? In Matthew 10:11-15 Jesus tells his disciples that “it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment” than for towns that reject the message of Jesus that the disciples are bringing them. We now know that this “more bearable” judgment cannot mean that Hell will be shorter for these people than for others, that once they have borne enough punishment to repent, they can warp to Heaven. Besides, how can anyone know the punishment will be more bearable for one group of people versus another if its length depends on how long they freely choose to stay in Hell? Moreover, a “more bearable” Hell still doesn’t sound very good, does it? If you and I are both on fire (you never know), and the fact that I have flame-retardant socks on makes the experience “more bearable” for me, does that guarantee that someday I will not be on fire? No. Heaven certainly isn’t an automatic consequence of “more bearable” punishment, and we have no reason to assume that it would be. But



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even more importantly, things are not more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah *after* the day of judgment—once they are in Hell—but *on* the day of judgment, when their eternal destination is revealed. Their restoration involves a “return to what they were before,” so that “on the day of judgment” the situation will be “more bearable” for them than for towns that rejected the message of Jesus.

But the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah had already died long before Ezekiel or Matthew wrote about them. What status could they possibly be returned to before their cities were destroyed to offer them the possibility of a more bearable judgment day? How about the status of people still having an opportunity to repent, which is “what they were before” their punishment came? Right there in Ezekiel 16:63, God describes his desire to make atonement for human guilt, a promise to *personally* make amends for sin. How would God eventually accomplish this, as we explained in Booklet 2? With the most popular Sunday School answer: Jesus! God the Son physically died in our place, making the option of eternal life in Heaven available and judgment day a lot more bearable for any with the faith that leads to such salvation. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Obviously, a significant number of folks do not wish to enter into this community with God through Jesus, or we wouldn’t have the clear and constant warning of eternal punishment throughout the Bible. This number apparently includes most of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, according to what Jude wrote about them.

But there is hope. Not false hope or hope that literally beats the Hell out of people as they finally repent. True hope and biblical hope, *available* to all who want it. Even those evil, horrible Sodomites? Absolutely. Remember how in Matthew 10 it would be more bearable for them on the day of judgment than for those who rejected Jesus’ message? Now we know how. In the very next chapter, “Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented

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long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you” (Matthew 11:20-24). Jesus *knows* that some people who lived before him who didn’t repent of their sin would have, given adequate access to Jesus. Since we know that the eternal destiny of Sodom in general is pretty bleak, there probably weren’t too many of these people in that city, but it would have only taken six more than Lot’s family for Sodom to “have remained to this day,” right? And how could Jesus give the deceased Sodomites access to the gospel—offering them a return to what they were before with a choice to repent—so that judgment day could be more bearable for them than for those who rejected the message of Jesus? With an only slightly less popular Sunday School answer: Lugg (see Booklet 3)! Sodom and Gomorrah’s punishment and restoration do not involve a transfer from Hell to Heaven. Rather, they consist of physical death—the penalty for their sin—and the offer of postmortem restoration from Lugg in Sheol/Hades to eternal life in Heaven through Jesus. They don’t have to go to Hell at all—even though they’ll predominantly decide to. Matthew 11:20-24 implies that there are at least a total of ten from these cities who will choose God’s restoration, and I hope there are many more!

### 3

So the example of Sodom and Gomorrah refutes restoration in a transient, corrective Hell. But there are many other passages that speak of God’s restoration following judgment. In order to succinctly review the ones most likely to suggest restoration in Hell that leads to Heaven, we’ll use the generous list of verses offered by *Love Wins* for that very purpose.<sup>13</sup> Then you know I’m not omitting anything

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that might threaten the conclusions we eventually draw.

First up is Isaiah 19:17-25. Instead of Sodom and Gomorrah, it's Egypt, the Jews' worst oppressor up to that time, getting punished for its evil. However, some people build "an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt," which is "a sign and witness to the Lord" that they're ready to repent. Isaiah tells us how God responds. "So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the Lord." Evil people get punished, but some who God realizes "will acknowledge" him *once he "makes himself known to them"* get to participate with the Jews in God's blessing (19:25). It doesn't say all the Egyptians, just the ones who "cry out to the Lord," and all of this restoration happens in Egypt, not in Hell.

In Jeremiah 5:3, 14-15 and 32:36-37, Judah is being restored from exile to the "distant," "ancient and enduring nation" of Babylon (not Hell) and restored to living in its homeland (not Heaven). In Lamentations 3:31-33 Jeremiah is in exile, writing to other exiles before they were allowed to return to Palestine. If we care at all to appropriately discern what the original audience was thinking when they read Jeremiah's words, it was that "not cast off by the Lord forever" meant a return from exile and nothing more. In Hosea 14:4-7 and Zechariah 9:11-12, the Jews are being restored from exile to non-specified countries and restored to living in their homeland, becoming freed prisoners returning to their fortress and once again dwelling in Lebanon's shade. In the next five passages the Jews are also being restored from exile to or punishment by several different countries and restored to living in their homeland, but part of this restoration involves judgment on the countries that oppressed them. So if we can extrapolate this type of restoration for the Jews to being restored to Heaven following correction in Hell, then whenever they finally repent and allegedly warp from Hell to Heaven, their oppressors are simultaneously judged by God, taking the Jews' place in Hell! Kind of counter-productive, especially as it seems there are a lot more people being condemned than restored. After all, those being judged following the Jews' restoration are Philistia in Zephaniah 2:4-7, Egypt and Assyria in Zechariah 10:6-10, Assyria/Nineveh in Nahum 2:1-2, the "enemy" and "all who oppressed you" in Zephaniah 3:15-20, and "all nations" in

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Joel 3:1-2. That's a lot of oppressors going to Hell to replace the Jews as they allegedly escape to Heaven! Moreover, we learn in Zephaniah 2:4-7 that an equivalent translation for the all-important phrase "restore their fortunes" is "bring back their captives" (see the footnote in the New International Version or translation in the King James Version). Like the others, these "restorations" are simply captives returning from exile and have nothing to do with Hell or Heaven.

What about references to restoration that don't obviously describe a rescue from exile in the past? In Amos 9:11-12 it is not people, but the Jewish king David's royal line that is being restored (his fallen tent). The Davidic dynasty ceased to hold power after Judah was exiled to Babylon, but it was restored when Jesus, a descendant of David, came to usher in his kingdom for both Jews and Gentiles. James quotes Amos in Acts 15:15-18 to demonstrate this. But there's nothing about Hell or Heaven here. Hosea 6:1-5 describes a future restoration expected by—not promised to—people who are insincerely repenting. They say they love God only until he rescues them from the trouble they've gotten themselves into. Then they ignore him again. God is clear that no restoration is coming here, as his "judgments flashed like lightning" upon them. He says, "Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears." In Micah 7:15-20 we find that God indeed hurls iniquities (sins) into the sea and won't stay angry forever, but stay angry at who? Certainly not everybody, as God only "pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the *remnant* of his inheritance." In other words, God does not pardon everyone, only the remnant. So what kind of people does he forgive? We find an example of one earlier in the chapter. "Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the Lord's wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right. He will bring me out into the light; I will see his righteousness" (7:9). How does God plead the case of the saved and establish their right to be forgiven, so that they don't have to bear his wrath? As Jesus. I told you he was the most popular Sunday School answer! "Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Romans 8:34). When Jesus returned to the current heaven after his resurrection, he didn't take up golf or get hooked

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on the newest soap opera. Every day he represents a divine reminder that the saved have the right to be in the forgiven remnant because Jesus' death satisfied God's just punishment against them (Hebrews 7:24-25).

Finally, in Isaiah 57:15-21, God reminds us that he will "restore comfort"; he "will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry." There will come "peace, to those far and near," says the Lord, "And I will heal them." Sounds great, until he continues. "But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which *cannot* rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 'There is *no peace*,' says my God, 'for the wicked.'" *Love Wins* leaves out that last part.<sup>14</sup> So who will find peace and healing with God? Who will God no longer accuse or be angry with then? "With him who is contrite and lowly in spirit," and Jesus confirms this (Matthew 5:3). Not with the wicked, and not with everyone. It's true, we shouldn't "miss the intentional healing, redemption, and love that God always includes when he talks about why he inflicts his wrath and punishment on his people."<sup>15</sup> But we also need to honestly acknowledge God's teaching that some people aren't his people. The wicked *cannot* find rest or peace, while the contrite and lowly who have accepted Jesus' words will comprise the limited remnant that is forgiven (James 1:21-22). Where humans propose temporary Hells, God proves them wrong and points to Jesus instead. Why? Because God doesn't want people to get to Hell and discover too late that it's forever. I don't want that either.

## 4

Exploring this urgency in God's warning serves as a practical way to bring our discussion on the longevity of Hell to a close. Are we to urgently pursue Jesus and the godly life that follows at least partly *because* of an eternal Hell or *despite* a not-so-threatening temporary Hell? Let's look at some examples of urgent encouragement to reject sin and pursue God, so that we can discern precisely why such urgency was necessary. There are two passages that describe how

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certain people are “handed over to Satan,” but not with the purpose of giving up on them so that they get what they deserve. Rather, the goals of Christians no longer associating with such people turn out to be much more positive for everyone involved. In 1 Timothy 1:18-20, two men who had rejected “faith and a good conscience” were punished “to be taught not to blaspheme.” Since a person who does not have faith is destroyed, and a person who does have faith is saved (Hebrews 10:39), these guys have gotten to the point where they are in danger of the destruction of Hell! After all, Jesus himself confirms that “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:29), as we elaborate on in Booklet 5. Now we don’t know exactly what the blaspheming entails in the case of these men, but it’s obvious that Paul’s strange restorative act here does not refer to a corrective pruning process *in* Hell; it’s meant to keep them from *going* there! 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 proves this beyond a shadow of a doubt. A man is having intimate relations with his father’s wife. Yikes. Paul tells the Corinthians to “hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved *on the day of the Lord,*” when “everyone *who calls on the name of the Lord* will be saved” (Acts 2:20-21). The undeniable goal of this kind of correction is restoration, but not in a temporary Hell. It’s too late then. Paul wants this man’s spirit saved *on the day of the Lord*—on judgment day—when he can be one of the sheep Jesus sends to eternal life rather than one of the goats Jesus sends to eternal punishment (Matthew 25:31-46). This is an urgent, last-ditch, no holds-barred effort of tough love by Paul to save the man from Hell.

And this man’s correction is not only urgent for his sake, but for his church’s sake as well. The Corinthians were not upset by this sin, but proud! Paul responds, “Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough (1 Corinthians 5:6)?” In other words, if they don’t take care of this problem, sin will slowly spread through the members of the whole church. Especially given the specific sin in this case, this is not a very pleasant thought, is it? But take heart, Paul leaves us with a happy ending. The sin is dealt with boldly and thoroughly with resulting

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improvement! In Paul's next letter to the Corinthians, he revisits what appears to be the same man's correction. "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him" (2 Corinthians 2:6-8). He brings it up again. "Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to *salvation* and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:8-10). It seems everyone involved made a turn for the better; they embraced a "repentance that leads to salvation"! Paul knows that both the danger of ignored sin and the danger of Hell are very urgent matters, ones that require an urgent response here and now.

A temporary, corrective Hell does not encourage such a response, even though efforts are made to convey an "infinitely urgent" need to follow Jesus immediately, "to live like the end is here, now, today," in spite of such a second chance.<sup>16</sup> Huh? Why? It is sobering to wonder how many folks have considered a transient Hell and thought, "Awesome, I don't *really* have to buy into Christianity or Jesus! At least not until I get to the garbage pile when I'll know they're for real and can change my mind." And I can totally understand why they would. If the Bible does teach a transient Hell, then we must ignore, add to, or change parts of it to make that the case, so why would we accept anything else it says at face value, especially when it doesn't appeal to us and when we have a failsafe after we die anyway? It is argued that people would urgently rush to such a non-emergent salvation just as they would drop everything to dig up a million dollars they just learned was buried in their backyard.<sup>17</sup> Not if that million dollars was *guaranteed* to them, as the opportunity for salvation from a temporary Hell would be! In that case it would be better to keep it safe in "the vault," as we all do with our fortunes, until we experience enough financial or literal Hell to convince us that we

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truly, urgently need such a saving gift, right? Any paradoxical plea for urgency by those who subscribe to a transient Hell falls face-flat. For example, *Love Wins* mentions several non-cited parables Jesus taught where “things did not turn out well for the people involved,” since they were complacent in following Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Ironically, the reason why things didn’t turn out well in these stories (and therefore likely why they weren’t cited) is because every one of them is about people finding themselves in Hell, without any chance of escape implied! I reference them here in the order they are given and invite you to explore them because I want you to have the whole story (Matthew 25:14-30, 25:1-13, 25:31-46, 21:33-46, 13:24-30). Part of why it’s so urgently important to follow Jesus now is because there’s not a chance in Hell you’ll be able to do it there.

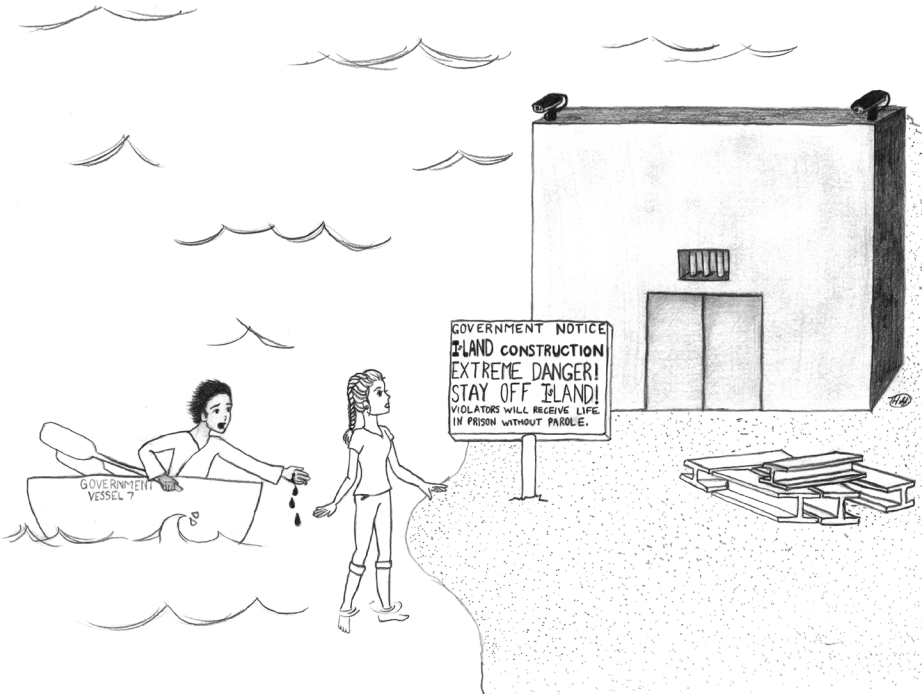
Finally, we’ve examined all five concepts associated with the length of time humans are in Hell: who ends up in Heaven, the definitions of words that are translated as “forever,” what the expectations and actions of those who will go to Hell reveal about its longevity, what the word “Hell” actually refers to, and whether or not God’s willingness to forgive or restore various people groups throughout the Bible should be extrapolated eternally and universally. All five consistently and persistently reveal the biblical Hell to be forever, with no one doin’ time to get reformed and no “continual hope of morning.”<sup>19</sup> This is not a conclusion anyone should be happy about. I’m not, and I suspect you’re not either. Hell is such a very difficult topic to talk about, especially for so long, so I thank you abundantly for sticking with me. I know that at times I’ve been matter-of-fact, bold, and critical, maybe in part to make it easier for *me* to cope with this abominable place. But mostly so that we can all have our vision of the hereafter coincide with God’s vision of the hereafter. Exploring a place so void of hope tempts us to desperately grope at whatever or whoever seems to have found hope there. But like mirages in the desert, we discover too late that we’ve only wasted valuable—and maybe crucial—time trying to get to them when they never had anything to offer us. Do not fear Hell; you have the choice to avoid it. Fear allowing yourself to misunderstand Hell, which can rob you of the ability to choose wisely.



## **BEYOND THE POINT OF NO RETURN**

When it comes to the hereafter, the Bible is unequivocal that there is a point of no return, after which those who are in Hell, as well as those who are in Heaven, will never leave. Like a physician with sometimes reluctant patients, God offers the restoration of eternal health to us and repeatedly emphasizes the urgency of this opportunity, but he knows we are going to make our own decision in the end.

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A woman approaches I-land construction, an island isolated from everywhere else where “I”—her free-willed self—assumes the authority to determine what is right and best, as God and his best are not on the island to oppose her. God must construct this Hell for those who freely choose to be there instead of with him, but he is clear that it is not intended as a correctional facility to eventually restore these folks to him. Rather, he knows that Hell is innately inescapable once people have decided to set foot there, and he uses his governing authority to plainly warn them of the danger. Therefore, although Hell is primarily a choice, it’s also in part a punishment for rejecting God’s authority and provision. However, he makes this retribution in Hell—a life there without pardon possible—nothing more than the consequence of the choice to be there in the first place. If the woman chooses to set foot there (or in the pre-Hell of Tartarus), it will be immediately seen that she wants such an inescapable I-land, and she will therefore logically be punished with a forever Hell. The restoration God himself provides via Jesus is only available before she makes that choice, and he clearly communicates the obvious urgency of her plight to her.

## Notes

1. Bell, R. (2011). *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 107.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
3. Are the references by John and Paul to “the coming wrath” connected to the Romans or to political revolt? Well, the two times John the Baptist utters this phrase almost certainly refer to the same event, as the accounts are nearly identical (Matthew 4:4-12, Luke 3:7-17). In Luke he tells “the crowds” to “flee from the coming wrath.” In Matthew he focuses his warning on certain people in the crowd, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were the clergymen or religious experts of the Jews. So everybody hears it, but it’s the Pharisees and Sadducees who are the target audience. Are these the type of folks eager to start a political rebellion? If by “flee from the coming wrath” John means “don’t start a revolt against the Romans,” does his specifically selected audience makes sense? Absolutely not. These two groups were the least likely to take up their pitchforks and torches against Caesar.

Why? Well, the Sadducees, who were involved in maintenance of the temple and its affairs, were also the aristocrats at the top of the socioeconomic ladder. They were doing quite well under Roman rule, so staging a coup to disrupt the status quo was not high on their to-do list. The Pharisees were regarded the primary Jewish religious leaders, especially by the common people, with the most expert understanding of the Jewish law. But during Jesus’ time they had become greedy and self-indulgent in their authority, so they also had reason not to upset the apple cart (Matthew 23:25). And even though they were dissatisfied with the Romans, they were not calling for a militant government takeover. Rather, in their many interactions with Jesus, the issues they wanted to discuss were not political, but almost entirely religious. Only once did they refer to Caesar, Rome, or anything political. They sent “spies” to ask Jesus if Jews should pay taxes to Caesar “to trap him in his words” (Matthew 22:15-22, Luke 20:20-26). Clearly,

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neither taxes nor Caesar were their primary concern here; they simply wanted to get Jesus in trouble. If he said yes, he would be very unpopular with the Jews. If he said no, they could call over Caesar's cronies and accuse Jesus of rebelling against Rome. They didn't want to rebel. They wanted the Romans to think Jesus was rebelling because they knew Rome would crush *him*. After all, just before they asked him about taxes, "the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him" (Luke 19:47). Neither the Sadducees nor the Pharisees themselves wanted to take up arms and revolt against Rome.

In fact, after these leaders had finally succeeded in bringing Jesus to trial in front of Pilate, the Roman official in charge of that region, they claim the reason Jesus is guilty is *because* he is "subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king" (Luke 22:66-23:2). In Luke 20:25 we see that Jesus' response to the question about taxes is quite the opposite. So these leaders are willing to lie, just so they can place themselves in direct opposition to the subverting Jews who want to disturb the peace, in direction opposition to those who are upset about paying taxes to Rome, and in direct opposition to anyone who claims to be king instead of Caesar! They are betraying their own people to appease the powers that be! Not exactly the folks John the Baptist would need to target to prevent political revolution against Rome, right?

He tells them—and the crowd—to "flee from the coming wrath," not because they're politically volatile, but because they're morally corrupt. He's not concerned about rebellion that leads to Roman wrath; he's worried about rebellion against God that leads to Hell, and he even equates "the coming wrath" with fire—unquenchable fire—just to be clear (Luke 3:9,17). And when his audience responds to this warning with, "What should we do?" does he give them pacifistic political advice? No, he gives moral advice, since disobeying God—not Rome—is their problem. He tells them to share with the needy, to not overcharge, to not use extortion, to not falsely accuse, and to be content. God commands all of these things throughout the Bible. Every way John gives the

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crowd to flee the coming wrath involves following God. What about the Pharisees and Sadducees? We know their problem wasn't political, but was it ethical? Was moral corruption the reason these religious leaders needed to flee the coming wrath? Absolutely. We're already aware that the Pharisees—and especially the Sadducees—were better off under Roman rule than most other Jews, and we're given all kinds of ways that they were abusing their power and influence, just as some religious leaders do today.

Jesus had a lot of not-so-positive words for them throughout the Gospels, but he consolidates his description of their sin largely in Matthew 23. Yep, a whole chapter. If you ever considered Jesus to be a buddy, a homie, or a hippie who just wants us all to get along and love everybody, you will never think that again after reading this. Yes, Jesus loves, but his unyielding respect for the truth *always* guides that love. Sometimes the truth demands compassionate love, as Jesus' response to the sick, diseased, harassed, and helpless demonstrates in Matthew 9:35-36 and many other places. But sometimes the truth demands tough love, as Jesus' words demonstrate here. Jesus, using the same term John did—a “brood of vipers”—to label the Pharisees and Sadducees, parallels John in his warning for them to escape, except Jesus replaces “the coming wrath” with, guess what? Gehenna. John tells them they're headed for coming wrath; Jesus not so coincidentally tells them they're headed for Hell (Matthew 3:4-7, 23:33). If there was any uncertainty at this point that such wrath refers to Roman retaliation, Jesus himself removes any doubt. It's important to avoid putting words into Jesus' mouth, or Jesus' words might take them right back out, saying the exact opposite.

What about Paul's reference to “the coming wrath?” When he makes it, Paul is writing his first of two letters to the church at Thessalonica, which is at least 1,000 miles from Jerusalem by land. No planes, trains, or automobiles back then. He doesn't mention the Romans or anything political at all. I think we can safely assume that he wasn't trying to dissuade the Thessalonians from starting a revolt on an entirely different continent in order to avoid “the coming wrath” of the Romans destroying Jerusalem

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20 or so years down the road. In fact, “the coming wrath” is not something he warns them of at all; it’s something they already knew they would be rescued from as they “wait for his (God’s) Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). They were already aware that Jesus’ death and resurrection would save them from the wrath to come after Jesus’ second coming, not the wrath of the Romans in AD 70.

And why did they need rescuing in the first place? Because they were worshipping idols rather than serving God (1:9). The coming wrath is not the consequence of a zealot raging against the machine; it’s the result of rejecting God’s authority by putting something or someone else’s in its place. That authority or idol might be a material god, a popular icon whose teachings are contrary to God’s, or people’s own opinions—something they really want to believe, even though they know the evidence tells them otherwise. When Paul writes his second letter to this church, he describes this same wrath for those that reject God’s authority. It “will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire and with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and will be shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9). An eternal place of punishment, void of God and good. “The coming wrath” sounds a lot like Gehenna, doesn’t it? Sounds like Hell.

4. “Kolasis”. *Strong’s Greek Lexicon*. Retrieved on 30 Jan 2013 from: <http://www.elijah.com/cgi-bin/strongs.cgi?file=greeklexicon&index=2849>
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7. "Kolasis". GreekBible.com. 2010. Retrieved on 30 Jan 2013 from: [http://www.greekbible.com/l.php?ko/lasis\\_n-----asf-\\_p](http://www.greekbible.com/l.php?ko/lasis_n-----asf-_p)
8. Bell, R. (2011). *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 91.
9. Ibid.
10. Capon, R.F. (1993). *The Mystery of Christ...and Why We Don't Get It*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, p. 101.
11. Bell, R. (2011). *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 107.
12. Ibid., p. 84.
13. Ibid., pp. 85-88.
14. Ibid., p. 87.
15. Bell, R. (2011). *The Love Wins Companion: A Study Guide for Those Who Want to Go Deeper*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 39.
16. Bell, R. (2011). *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, pp. 196-197.
17. Bell, R. (2011). *The Love Wins Companion: A Study Guide for Those Who Want to Go Deeper*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, pp. 188-190.
18. Bell, R. (2011). *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 196.
19. Lewis, C.S. (1946). *The Great Divorce*. New York, NY: Touchstone, p. 39.

