

The Three Heavens,

and things that can now be told

The central theme of this manuscript originated in the tenth chapter of my book, *The Brightness Around Him*, but what follows will also include a significant amount of new material that I have learned since the book's publishing. I pray the richness of God's kindness will somehow bleed through my feeble attempt at words to describe the enormity of His goodness and love for us. I hope the byproduct of these words will increase our affections for Him and our trust in His plans.

Recently, after reading several well-regarded commentaries and on-line articles on the topic of "resurrections," the idea of God's plan including one or two future resurrections was reinforced as the predominant belief of mainstream Christian thinking. Most believe in two, with some proposing the first one is reserved for the saved and the second for the unsaved. Others see the people involved in each one slightly different. Those proponents rely on Revelation 20:4-6 to describe the ones harvested in each. There, we read about "souls" being made alive in the "first resurrection," then, reigning with Christ for "a thousand years." We also find "the rest of the dead do not come to life until the thousand years were ended." These expositors understand the second resurrection occurs when "the rest of the dead" come to life.

Furthermore, some of the writers who believe in two resurrections use John 5:28-29 and Revelation 20:12-15 to provide a few more details concerning the second one. In those passages, we find "the hour" comes when "all who are in the tomb" are raised either to "life," or to "judgement," with the latter being "thrown into the lake of fire." (I also found one other writer who expressed the same belief, except that he separated the second into two parts, the saved and the unsaved, and concluded there are three. However, since his second and third counts happen at the same time when "the hour" comes," most writers counted this one event as one resurrection.)

As I read each argument, I found some merit in each, and I appreciated the light each teacher was able to cast on the subject. But what would happen if they were shown another resurrection occurring after the ones they described? Pardon the pun, but this would present a "grave" problem for their counts and their conclusions, because whether they believe in one or two, afterwards, they are adamant that the eternal destinies for all of mankind are set in stone, and it's over.

According to them, all “believers” will be in heaven forever, and all “non-believers” will either be exterminated forever, or sent to a place of endless conscious torment forever, after the first or second resurrection. If true, what would be the purpose for another occurring at a much later time? Obviously, according to their understanding, there would be no need for one.

However, in the rest of this article, we will clearly demonstrate that the Bible does teach another resurrection following the ones they described. And once this additional resurrection is realized, it will become necessary to re-exam some of the presuppositions we’ve been taught concerning the outcome of God’s plan.

Before we begin, let me give you a brief overview of where this manuscript is heading. First, we will point to three resurrections using the writings of Paul, John, and Moses. Then, we will provide significant evidence for the same in a multitude of other passages from Genesis to Revelation. Enough confirmation will be uncovered to make these points more than reasonable and plain to see. Finally, we intend to connect the three resurrections to **The Three Heavens**.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 informs us that a chord of three strands is not easily broken. Therefore, we will demonstrate how the writings of these two Apostles and the great Prophet are three strands on this subject that are tightly woven together in one “a chord” 😊. We will start with Paul’s words.

1st Corinthians 15: 20-28

20. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruit of those who have fallen asleep. 21. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23. But each one in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterwards, those who are Christ’s at His coming. 24. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and authority and power. 25. For He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet. 26. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death . . . 28. Now when all things are made subject to Him, the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

Before we dive into the details here, I’d like to point you to two facts that will dramatically affect how we interpret the contents of these verses. Number one: In verse 20, Paul stated that Christ is the first-fruit of those who have fallen asleep. This not only establishes that He was the first one to be resurrected, but this first-**fruit** reference provides the overall theme in what follows. It is

an agricultural theme, comparing all men to crops to be harvested, and it is nothing new. As author Julie Ferwerda asked when she opened the chapter, *The Great Harvests*, in her book, *Raising Hell*: “Have you ever noticed that the Bible is blooming full of agricultural terms? There’s a significant reason for this that goes beyond a nice little farming theme. Consider the frequency of some of these words as they occur in the original languages (Hebrew and Greek): Season – 334; Field – 332; Seed – 300; Crop/Produce – 124; Vineyard – 115; Harvest – 78; Planting – 66; Wheat 45; Barley – 36; Farmer – 26; Grapes – 22; Winepress – 21.” I believe Julie’s comments, about us missing out when we fail to dig deep enough to understand these agricultural references, are spot-on. And we will follow her advice by digging a little deeper, right after a discussion of the next point.

Number two: In verse 20, the verb “*raised*” in the phrase, “*has been raised*,” is in the **perfect tense**. With this tense, Paul made it abundantly clear that Jesus had already risen, but when he begins discussing how all others would follow, he changed the verb to the **future tense**, “*shall be made alive*.” In other words, after having established Christ as **the first one** to be resurrected, Paul begins a discussion on how **all of mankind** will be vivified – that is, made alive. Verses 21 and 22 remind us that as one man brought death into the world, one man will bring life to the same set of people. No matter if you believe in universal salvation, or eternal conscious torment, or annihilation of the wicked, everyone agrees that all will be “*made alive*,” or else, how could you be saved, tormented, or annihilated, if you did not come back from the dead first?

Verse 23 establishes that each person will be raised in his own *order*. “*Tagma*” is the Greek word translated as “*order*,” and according to Strong’s Concordance, it is a military word signifying a company, squadron, or group. It also implies something arranged in a precise sequence, signifying a great deal of careful planning. With all of mankind being **in Christ**, and since He is the first-fruit, *tagma* is used here metaphorically to denote an arrangement of people in groups to be harvested, as it is spelled out in the remainder of verse 23 and into 24.

The point Paul is making here is worth repeating – Since we are all “*in*” (included with) Adam, and he died, we will all die. But by the same logic, since all are also “*in*” Christ, and He was resurrected, we will all be resurrected. Verse 21 repeats this point when Paul reiterates that by one man came death and by another man came resurrection.

The first group in the list to be resurrected is normally translated as “Christ the first-fruits,” and most believe this strictly refers to Jesus. However, it cannot refer to Him for several reasons. First, as we have made clear, the phrase: “*shall be made alive*,” is written in the future tense, and

since Jesus had already risen at the time of this writing, this cannot refer to Him. Therefore, this language is referring to those who are **“in Him”** that will be a part of the **first resurrection**.

Secondly, the introductory noun in the sentence, “tagma,” refers to a group, not just one person. Revelation 20:4-6 proves the point, as it reveals the company or squadron being made alive in the **first resurrection**: *“And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and upon their hand: and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. **The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed.** Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the **first resurrection**; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.”* (As a side note, I recently learned that the phrase, “a thousand years,” was a figure of speech that meant “a long period of time,” just like the phrase, “cattle on a thousand hills” figuratively meant: “a bunch of beef.”)

And thirdly, there is no article in front of the word **“christos,”** where it appears in the first part of verse 23. Therefore, **we are not obligated** to infer “Christ” from this word. Let me explain. Christos in the Greek simply means “anointed.” Put an article in front of it, and you have “the anointed,” or “the Christ,” as in the previous verse 22 and in the latter part of verse 23. Both of those occurrences have “the” in front of christos. However, sandwiched in between them, christos is found without the article, making it clearly distinct from the other two occurrences. Therefore, a more precise translation of this phrase would be: **“anointed first-fruit.”**

Although Jesus was the first one to be resurrected, He was **not** the first group, nor even in the first group. The role Jesus played was to pave the way for all the groups that will follow Him. **This makes much more sense than a big announcement about squadrons to be made alive, only to find one man, and then everyone else, as is typically taught.** Therefore, the first group in Christ to be resurrected, or made alive, are referred to as *“first-fruit,”* and it’s also the name used for them in Revelation 14:4. They are harvested first among all believers, with the rest coming in the second squadron, *“those who are Christ’s at His coming.”*

The NIV refers to this second group as *“those who belong to Him”* at the time of His appearance, as opposed to those who do not. Personally, I think a better translation identifies the second group with *“those who are Christ’s in His presence,”* as the Concordant Literal renders it. As I see it, these are people who have already accepted Him, or ones whose hearts have been prepared

to bow and worship Him when they see Him face to face. They become His in His presence, or at His coming.

As we mentioned at the beginning, John 5:28-29 tells us a little more about the second resurrection: *“Do not marvel at this; **for an hour** is coming in which **all who are in the tombs** shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life and those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”* **This can’t pertain to the first resurrection, because that one was limited.** And Revelation 20:12-15 gives us further insight into this second one: *“And I saw the dead, the great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds...And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”*

Back to our Corinthians text – following the harvest of the first two groups, verse 24 states: *“then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father.”* Some consider the matter closed at this point. They conclude *“then comes the end,”* means the doomsday clock has sounded for those who did not believe in Jesus prior to their death, and they, the majority, will go down into the lake of fire to be eternally tormented, or annihilated, while the minority in the second group will go up to heaven and join the first group for eternity.

However, the main focus in our text is **squadrons** who are to be made alive, not to be made dead. Using this rationale, others translate the phrase, *“then comes the end”* as *“then, comes the remainder.”* In either case, I see both phrases referring to the **end of the squadrons**. Here, we find the last group to be vivified – the third harvest. What follows is proof of a third group.

The writings of John in Revelation chapter 14 align perfectly with Paul’s words. In verses 1-5, we find the first resurrected group: *“**Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with Him 144,000** who had His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps, and they sang a new song. . . these who follow the Lamb wherever He goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as **first-fruits** . . .”*

In verses 14-16, we find the second resurrection: *“**Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like the son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon***

the cloud, 'Put in your sickle, and reap, **for the hour** (from John 5:28-29) to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped." Notice how the earth was ripe and harvested just as our passage in John 5:28-29 informed us. But also notice, there is another harvest to come – the third squadron.

The next harvest reaps **grapes** as we find in verses 18-20: "**Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sickle, 'Put in your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine from the earth, for its grapes are ripe.'** So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God; and the wine was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress. . ." In this metaphoric language, grapes are harvested and transformed by God's wrath into something good after its outside flesh is removed. We will discuss this "wrath" later, and it may surprise you to know what it is and what it accomplishes. But the main point we are making at this juncture is that there is a third group that is harvested, or resurrected.

Before you think we might be stretching the connection between these passages, let's look at another reference in the Bible to three harvests and see how the writings of Moses ties them all together making one strong chord. Going back to point number one concerning our Corinthian's text, and in keeping with the agricultural theme found there, **it is no coincidence** that Israel **celebrated** three feasts each year after the harvest of three different crops. Moses wrote about them and these well-known feasts, and they were called: **The Feast of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles**, (Exodus 23:14-17.) Three times a year, men were to "**appear before the Lord God**" and "**celebrate a festival unto me.**"

The first celebration was the Feast of Passover, and barley was harvested at this time. As a crop, it matured first, and in Leviticus we find the first-fruit of the barley being **mixed with oil**, "anointed" if you will, and cooked in "**an offering by fire to the Lord.**" As an **anointed first-fruit**, it was consecrated to the Lord **as an earnest or pledge for the full harvests yet to be gathered during the rest of the year.** The barley squadron appears to represent those who mature first in Christ. And remember how Jesus fed the masses with five (multiple – more than one) loaves of barley? Isn't that the calling of first-fruits, to be a living sacrifice in service to others?

The second celebration was the Feast of Pentecost. Wheat was harvested at this time, and in Leviticus 23:17 we find **two** loaves of flour mixed with leaven and offered to God. According to verses 15-16, the Jews were commanded to start counting fifty days from the day of the Feasts of

First-fruits to the next feast, the Feast of Pentecost. During the forty-nine days of this count, which they call “the counting of the Omer,” the wheat crop was in the ripening process. By the end of the Omer count, the crop is ready for harvest, and the first-fruits of the wheat crop could be brought to the temple for Pentecost. Notice how both grains, barley and wheat, had to be “cooked” in fire. The description of these feast days is rich with symbolic significance and meaning.

The last celebration was the Feast of Tabernacles. In Nehemiah 8:1-12, we find all Israelites **and all strangers in the land** gathering to read the law during this feast. At that point, they stood together, read it, and said, “Amen” in unity, signifying that everyone was in agreement with God’s ways. **Grapes** were harvested at this last feast **celebration!** And what did they do with the grapes after harvesting them? They put them in the wine press and stomped them under their feet to make wine! Remember our Corinthians passage: “For He must reign until He puts all **enemies under His feet.**” And Paul goes back to this “under His feet” theme several times in the latter part of our Corinthians text, until he ends in verse 28 with, “that God may be **all in all.**” This momentous victory marks the point when death is destroyed, as we learned from verse 26.

The chart below may be helpful as it summarizes what we have found concerning the three groups to be harvested/resurrected.

Scriptural References	First Harvest/ Resurrection	Second Harvest/ Resurrection	Third Harvest/ Resurrection
1 Corinthians 15	First-fruit	His at His coming	Enemies - put under His feet
Revelation 14	First-fruit	Crops that are ready/ripe (His) at "the hour" of His coming	Grapes - tossed into the winepress of God's wrath
John 5:28-29		Ones found at the "hour" with good deeds; His, not His enemies	
Revelation 20		Ones found in Book of Life with good deeds; His, not His enemies	
Leviticus 23 Israel's Feast Celebrations	Passover: Barley - First-fruit	Pentecost: Wheat	Tabernacles: Grapes

From the beginning in Genesis, we also find significant foreshadowing of the three groups to be resurrected in the story of Noah and his sons. It has been said that all of humanity can be summed up in Noah's sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Shem's personality, as the oldest and more mature, matched those resurrected in the first group. He was a man of character, authority, and honor, and His worldview was divorced from personal gain. Ham was the opposite. He was the youngest and less mature brother who was self-centered and more concerned with self-preservation and personal gain. Japheth was the one in the middle. Like his older brother, he had some genuine concern for others, but he also possessed some self-centered tendencies as well, just like his younger brother. One commentator I read called Japheth, "bi-polar" – more on that later.

But for me, the most notable of all of these indirect references to the three groups are expressed in:

1. The fact that Jesus raised a person from the dead on three different occasions during His ministry on earth. Paul: *"In Christ shall all (three groups) be made alive."*
2. Our Lord's words found in Luke 13:32: *"Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people **today and tomorrow**, and on the **third day** I will accomplish my purpose/ I will reach my goal."* What's His purpose? He came not to condemn the world, but to save it. The casting out demons is the removal of evil, that which stands in opposition to God's will in us. And to save means to rescue or heal. With this understanding, we find Jesus sending a prophetic message to Herod, a prince and power of this world standing in opposition to His work. He said to tell that rascal (devil) that I'm going to cast evil out of men and save them today; I'm going to do it a second time tomorrow, but on the third time around, I'll reach my goal, by saving them all. In doing so, His will, will be done/accomplished.
3. And why do you suppose Jesus spent three days in the grave? Maybe this was the sign of Jonah where He would spend "three days in the earth" resurrecting people at three different times before accomplishing His purpose and reaching His goal.

I also believe it is more than coincidental that we have three manifestations of the God-Head. It appears that each one identifies with the three groups to be made alive.

1. **The Father**, who is sovereign, uses vessels in the first group to rule and reign with Him for a season.

2. **The Son** – His – who uses vessels in the second group for worship. They are “His” at His coming.
3. **The Holy Spirit**, which falls as fire on those to be purified in the third group in an age to come. When the Holy Spirit fills a person in this group, it will engender a natural flow of praise in words previously unutterable to them, because it was foreign to their thinking – like a foreign language. These words of praise are spoken directly to our Heavenly Father.

And here is another interesting observation – If the first group rules and reigns with God until He puts all enemies under His feet, and that occurs when the grapes are harvested and thrown into the wine press, then we know the period of time between the first and second resurrection is a thousand years – meaning a long period of time (just as the phrase “cattle on a thousand hills,” is not to be taken literally; it just means “a bunch of beef.”)

The dividing of that long period of time is found in Israel’s feast celebrations, where there were 50 days between the first and second harvests. There were also 127 days between the second and third.

With all of the symbolism found here, we cannot be certain of the exact timing between each resurrection, but **one thing we do know for sure, the harvest of each crop does NOT occur at the same time; they are completely distinct celebrations separated by distinct periods of time.** Therefore, we cannot divide the second resurrection and come up with three; the third transpires at a much later date. We also know that the entire harvest season is not complete until both grains have been harvested for bread, and the grapes have been harvested for wine. **It appears that God’s communion with mankind is not complete until the bread and the wine are ready to be served.**

Speaking of communion, from the phrase, “*while they were eating,*” many theories have been proposed about what was on the menu at the Last Supper. We know the Jewish people were fiercely traditional, and from those traditions, we know the meal on the first day of Unleavened Bread, could have included a variety of dishes, including a stew of beans, a green salad, olives, dates, honeycomb, fish, and possibly lamb. An article in Christianity Today, another in Smithsonian Magazine, plus several other on-line articles from various scholars, confirm these dishes as good possibilities based on what we know about the traditions surrounding this meal.

The point to be made here, is that of all those items they ate that night, **Jesus only mentions the bread and wine.** Could there be some significance here? I believe the answer is a resounding, “yes,” for the bread and wine speak of the three groups to be resurrected.

While eating the meal, Jesus **broke the bread.** Afterward, He took **a cup**, and poured wine into it. The imagery is clear – two pieces of bread and a cup of wine. Concerning the partaking of them, Luke and Paul added these words from Jesus: **“Do this in remembrance of me.”** In essence, Jesus was saying, when you do this, remember something about me, **for I am the Lord of the Harvest;** I am the One who made it possible for the barley and the wheat to be turned into bread, symbolized by the dividing of that bread. I am also the One responsible for the harvest of grapes and turning them into wine. He made all of it possible by the breaking of His body and the pouring out of His blood in a much-needed covenant called “Grace.” **He is the bread of life, and He is the vine which gives life to the grapes! He is the reason for the three feast celebrations!**

For the past 2000 years, He established a reminder for us, namely, that He spilled His blood to the point of death and said, *"It is finished."* At that point, the veil in the Temple separating God and man was ripped in two. The choice made by one man, Adam, led men down the undesired path of separation from God and eventual death. Now the choice of another, Jesus, leads men back to God, resulting in life!

And here is something else to remember about Him. The Adversary knew of God’s plans, and he made a desperate attempt to disrupt them when Jesus was tested three times. The first test was to take some stones from the wilderness and turn them into bread to satisfy His hunger. I believe these stones represent the bread from the barley harvest. In this test, Jesus was asked to take that bread, and leave the rest. Essentially, the Adversary told Jesus that the bread from the barley harvest alone **would satisfy His desire.**

Jesus responded that **man would not be able to live on bread alone.** In other words, His Father’s plans would not end in perfection by taking that bread group only; more crops would need to be harvested as well. Furthermore, mankind would live by the proclamations which came out of the mouth of God – proclamations that include all families, nations, and peoples being blessed by His Son’s sacrifice on the Cross, not just the barley group.

After passing the first test, the Adversary took Jesus to the highest point on the Temple grounds in view of all that worshipped God. He told Jesus that if He would jump (come down from His calling) He would not be hurt by these stones on the Temple grounds. 1 Peter 2:5 refers to God’s

people as living stones being built as a spiritual house. Obviously, these stones would not hurt our Lord's ministry. I believe this second group of stones, referred to in this second test, represent the wheat from the second harvest - those that are **His at His coming**. Again, Jesus rejected that offer, because there is another crop to be harvested – the grapes.

Unfortunately, most of Christianity appears to have fallen for one, or both, of these first two temptations - take the bread group(s) and leave the rest. That may be enough to satisfy their desires, but not our Father's. He wants that last group, the wine, as much as He wants the bread.

Understanding that Jesus would not be satisfied with the bread groups alone, His final test came when He was taken to a high mountain. Why a mountain? And what mountain?

First, a mountain is a pile of stones, either sedimentary or metamorphic, that have been elevated over time by a force beneath them – a great force which lifted them up. Therefore, I submit this mountain represented the nation of Israel, who had been elevated above all other nations for the purpose of establishing God's Kingdom on the earth (Isaiah 2:1-5.) **On this mountain** Jesus was able to see "all the kingdoms of the earth." The Adversary then offered it to Him, if Jesus would worship him. Of course, Jesus rejected that offer too and went on to fulfill His destiny.

To learn more about **this mountain** and those involved in the third test, let's review the story found in Mathew 21 and in the 11th chapter of Mark where Jesus curses a fruitless **fig tree**. When His disciples marveled at the immediate death of the tree, Jesus told them that if they had faith, "*if ye shall say to **this mountain**, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done.*" **The fig tree** and **this mountain** were direct references to the nation of Israel to whom Jesus had been sent. Because they rejected Him, Jesus foretold their fate as they would be removed as a nation and thrown into the sea of humanity in 70 A.D. at the hands of the Romans. Furthermore, Jesus said to that tree, "*May you never bear fruit again.*" In perfect alignment with these words, Mark informs us that afterwards, Jesus went to the Temple and cleansed it.

Reading the 23rd chapter of Mathew will provide a good overview about how Jesus felt about those of His own household who rejected Him. They had become His enemies. In the 24th and 25th chapters, He ministered to the disciples and let them know about the impending judgment that would fall on that generation in Israel and the reasons for it. As three examples, He told His disciples to learn from the sign of the fig tree, be faithful like the wise servant, and be prepared like the five wise virgins who had oil in their jars for the arrival of the bridegroom.

Jesus also said there would be two different types of people in Israel. They had been called as a nation to be laborers in the field and in the mills for the harvest of the nations. The ones who were unprepared to accept the new covenant of grace would be removed from their calling, while the others who accepted God's grace, would be left behind to finish the work of the harvest. Those left behind to do that work would become a part of the **stone** "*cut out of the mountain without human hands.*" We are told this rock will crush all the kingdoms in Nebuchadnezzar's vision. It will become God's Kingdom filling the whole earth, and it will never be destroyed (Daniel chapter 2.)

For the ones who rejected Him and were removed from the field and the mills, the good news for them is that there is coming a day when "*all of Israel*" shall be saved (Romans 11:26), thus, fulfilling the prophecy in them where many who were chosen to be first to enter this Kingdom, would be the last ones to enter. However, **they will enter**, but only after being harvested as grapes and spending some time in the winepress of His wrath, before they are turned into **the best** wine.

In the parable of the talents, those in Israel who rejected Jesus were depicted as the one talent person who buried their talent and stayed under the Covenant of the Law. The two-talent person, the wheat harvest, mixes the two covenants, Law and Grace, believing that salvation is based on the work of Jesus, plus what they do and the decisions they make. The five-talent person reflects the Barley crop – those who trust solely in the work of Christ alone. In the Bible, five is the number that represents grace.

The idea of saving those who rejected Him in this life is something traditional theology doesn't think will be possible. However, as Jesus explained to His disciples concerning the rich young ruler, **even though it seems impossible for some to enter the kingdom of heaven based on their behavior, with God, all things are possible, based on His behavior.** Therefore, He promises to seek the lost sheep "*until He finds it*" (Luke 15:4). Taking full responsibility, He carries it on His shoulders back to safety.

There's a popular song on the radio we sang at a church I recently attended – *Unstoppable God*. The words fit so well, for "**mercy triumphs on the third day,**" for to Him "**nothing is impossible; God's plan is "unstoppable!"**" His Son resisted temptations to take less, and went to the Cross to get it all. Jesus began His ministry passing three tests, and ended it in the garden when He prayed **three times**: "Father, if possible, let this cup pass; nevertheless, thy will be done." Jesus did the Father's will, and this is what He wants us to remember about Him when taking Communion.

I also believe we can learn more about this subject from the story of Abraham, Lot, and Sodom found in Genesis chapters 18 and 19. This was another foreshadowing of what was to come for the three groups. It also served as a picture of the future of Israel – those who would embrace the covenant of Grace, those who would remain in sin under the old covenant, and the **bi-polar** ones who would mix the two covenants.

In Ezekiel 16:48-50, and in Amos 4:1-11, God compared Sodom to Israel. In those stories, Israel becomes like Ham, Noah's son, who became lost in his self-centered world. Abraham would embrace grace and become like Shem, who loved the Lord and was concerned for the well-being of his neighbors. Lot's family was more like hard-working Japhet. His wife would look back to the old covenant and his daughters tried to save their seed by returning to the ways of Sodom. Abraham's seed would move into the Promised Land first, while Lot's descendants, as Moabites and Ammonites, would be on the outside for a time. Sodom would face death, but would later be restored, just like Lot's descendants. God's promises of restoration for both groups are found in the 16th chapter of Ezekiel and the 49th chapter of Jeremiah. The point is, in God's plan, all three groups will ultimately become aware of and experience His unmerited favor and unconditional love for them, but it will be done in a predetermined order, carefully crafted and orchestrated, for the necessary training that each group must experience to become like their Father.

Another interesting connection can be made between the three groups in the story of the three **wise men**. These Magi were notable **pilgrims** whose gifts represented their culture – **where they were from**, as one writer stated it. Each brought gifts of adoration based on **who they were**, as that same writer said. Gold was a gift for a king, signifying royalty and reigning, something the first group would be allowed to participate in after they were harvested. Frankincense was a gift for a priest and used by them in worship, just as the second group did after they were harvested. Myrrh was an embalming ointment used for those who would experience the second death but would also be raised again as the third group. When God is finished with each group, they all become "**wise men.**"

Perhaps we can also gain a little insight into the three groups from Sigmund Freud's personality theory. He divided the human psyche into three parts – the id, ego and superego. According to his theory, the id is the primitive and instinctive component of personality, which supposes that every wishful impulse should be satisfied immediately, regardless of the consequences. The ego mediates between the unrealistic id and the real world. It attempts to work

out ways of satisfying id's demands but with some consideration of others. The superego's function is to control the id's impulses. It also has the function of persuading the ego to turn to moralistic goals, rather than simply finding work-arounds that satisfy id's urges.

The personalities of the three groups may also match quite well with Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard's three spheres of existence. The first one is the Aesthetic Sphere. It is a way of living one's life chiefly concerned with pleasure and self-indulgence. The second one is the Ethical Sphere, where the concepts of good and evil begin to take shape along with the notion of bearing responsibility for others. The final sphere is the Religious Sphere, where humans can achieve their highest purpose by developing a relationship with a transcendent power.

Both Freud and Kierkegaard's secular theories are insightful, but we have hardly exhausted the supply of comparisons to the three groups in other Bible passages. For example, in II Samuel 22:2 and Psalms 18:2, we find David singing words that carry significant meaning for the three – *"The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer."* As we will see later in this article, when we discuss the life of Peter, the rock, he is associated with those in the first group. The Lord is also the protector of those who are His, represented by the second group, and the deliverer of those in the third who experience the lake of fire. In John 14:6 Jesus said He was the way, the truth, and the life, with each of these three attributes holding significant meaning for each group resurrected.

In summary of this section, for those who can only recognize two harvests, adding a third may not be permissible. According to their eschatology, a third may fall into the category of unthinkable, therefore, "unutterable" (2 Corinthians 12:4.) However, for those who see three, the questions become: "Who participates in the third harvest? Who are these enemies?" The anointed first-fruits and the rest of those whose names were found in the Lamb's Book of Life had already been resurrected in two previous harvests, with a great deal of time elapsing between each reaping. And as we have seen, and with much more to be presented in this paper, God's Word reveals solid answers to these questions. However, it may take some time, for those who desire to hang on to what is popular, before they will realize the "grave" problems they have with their counts and with their limited vision of God's resurrection plans for humanity.

A Little Church History and Three Perspectives

The certainty of all of mankind being harvested was the predominant belief of the early church in the first five to six hundred years after Christ's resurrection according to some church

historians. As a matter of fact, four of the six major Christian schools in the first few centuries A.D. held this belief – Antioch, Alexandria, Caesarea, and Edessa. Only the Latin school at Carthage and the school at Ephesus failed to recognize the third harvest. Carthage taught endless torment in hell for non-believers, and Ephesus taught the annihilation of them.

Since the scriptures are clear in that God is love (1 John 4:8), and love perseveres and never fails (1 Corinthians 13:7-8), each perspective promotes one of three different pictures of what love's victory would look like at the consummation of the ages.

In the image offered by the Latin school at Carthage, many are celebrating in heaven, while others suffer in hell-fire and brimstone . . . forever . . . tormented day and night . . . with no possibility of escape. And despite the availability of an endless amount of time to consider the terrible mistakes made during their finite time on earth, there's no possibility of parole for the once wicked. There's no possibility for a change of heart, and even if there were, the time for extending mercy and forgiveness has passed. God's mercy did not endure for them, even though all twenty-six verses in the 136th chapter of Psalms end with the same words – words indicating mercy would endure throughout the ages. In this view, and in the next one, Romans 11:32 raises some questions – ***“For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that He may have mercy on all.”***

And even though all wrongs have been made right in heaven, and even though all that was lost in a previous life has been restored, and even though restitution has been made beyond all expectations and beyond our wildest imagination, with the redeemed enjoying all of it for billions upon billions of years, in spite of all of this, the possibility for a change of heart and reconciliation for God's wayward sons and daughters is gone. God tried to reach them during the relatively few years they had on earth. He tried really, really hard, and now, hell is a permanent reminder of His colossal attempts, which ended in far more failures than successes.

Some have made noble attempts to justify this picture of victory as they believe God is a gentleman and would not force His will on anyone, but rather, He would just honor their request to choose hell over heaven. However, this does not gel with their understanding of the parable of the rich man in Hades, who wanted to warn his brothers, *“lest they come into this place of torment.”* Obviously, the rich man didn't want to be there; he wanted to get the hell out! Only the mentally ill would choose eternal torture over eternal bliss, once fully informed.

Regarding free will, how ironic it is for men to say He won't violate man's free will, but these same men have no problem believing that God will one day force all men to bow and confess to

Christ, then keep them in a place they'd rather not be for all eternity. Furthermore, retired philosophy professor Dr. Thomas Talbott demonstrated the lack of logic in this assertion when he compared it to a child sticking his hand in an open flame. Children do some stupid things in spite of our warnings, and sometimes, they get burnt. But if they were to continue to stick their hand in the fire every time they saw an open flame, wouldn't that qualify as insanity? And wouldn't we seek professional help for such a child? Certainly, we would not condemn them. Writing off your children as people who will never learn, is that a picture of a parent's love that endures all things and never fails? There seems to be a few blurry spots in this picture.

In the second image of God's victory, as promoted by the school at Ephesus, they see many celebrating in heaven, while others who after being raised from the dead and judged for their bad behavior, are annihilated – never to be heard from again. The end result is much the same as in the first view, but rather than erecting hell's permanent monument of failure, God decided to wipe them out – out of sight, out of mind.

I understand that a recent Pope was against the death penalty, because he thought that with a little more time, the guilty just might repent. But in this second picture, just as in the first, God decided against allowing any more time for repentance. If this is the case, I really don't understand why the dead would need to be taken from their graves, just to be sent right back. Maybe we need them to suffer death one last time for the sake of justice? If so, I'm just glad the rest of us don't receive the justice we deserve.

To the family and friends in heaven of those exterminated, how do we find them reacting to the idea of never seeing their loved ones again? I heard a pastor of a mega church explain how people in heaven will be able to overcome the sadness of lost loved ones annihilated or suffering throughout eternity. The title of his message was displayed in flashing bright lights outside the church. The sign read "Hell Yes!" "Heaven will be like eating a nice big juicy steak," the pastor explained. "While enjoying it, you are not thinking about the starving people all over the world. That's what heaven will be like." I noticed a quiet hush fell over the building . . .

And that brings us to the third picture of God's ultimate victory - everyone celebrating in heaven with some arriving sooner than others, but all eventually getting there after having been salted with fire, because the scriptures state that everyone will be salted with fire, after having been judged for their deeds and forgiven of their sins, once recognizing their own human frailty and the need for a change of heart, and after having acknowledged what Jesus provided for them by His

death on the Cross. It took a little more time for some, and maybe a lot more time for the really rebellious, but eventually they finally came in, because love endures all things and never fails. A brilliant Creator foreordained the end, and now we look back and see how He used free will as an instrument in His hand. As Talbott pointed out, the more we rebelled against God, the more miserable and tormented we eventually became, giving us even more incentive to repent. The consequences of sin ended up being a means to reveal what happens when we don't act in love towards each other.

People who see this picture believe that all paths have the same destination –reconciliation to Him and each other. In this picture, Christ has become all in all, not all in some (I Corinthians 15:28), every tear has been wiped away off all faces, not just some (Isaiah 25:8), and every family and nation has been blessed, not just a few (Genesis 12:3, & 18:18), because Jesus became the Savior of the world, not just the Savior of some (1 John 4:14), when He took away the sins of the world, and not just some (John 1:29), by drawing or dragging all men to Him, not just some (John 12:32), and now there is no more death because of His victory over the grave.

Before discussing other scriptural reasons why the majority of the schools believed in the harvest of all, please note that Christ could not be “all in all,” and all would not be made alive, and death would not be destroyed, if the last group remained in the second death!

The Lake of Fire

At this point, some may be asking how anyone in this final group could make it out of the lake of fire based on what we've been taught by those who believe there is no escape from it. F.H. Robison (1885-1932) once said: *“Our concepts of truth are usually colored more or less by teachers,”* and I submit, there has been a lot of coloring by well-intended, but less informed teachers. Below are seven points to consider before coloring the lake of fire as a final and eternal destination.

1. The word **“thrown,”** in the phrase, *“thrown into the lake of fire”* and the word **“threw,”** in the phrase, *“threw it (the vintage - grapes) into the great winepress of God's wrath,”* are translations from the same Greek word, *“ballo”* (Strong's 906.) Both appear in the aorist tense, in the indicative mood. This tense is just a snap-shot of an event. Both the tense and the mood signify an **“entry into a phase without any reference to permanency,”** according to the famous Dr. Daniel Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary.

2. The gates to the New Jerusalem are always open. The following comes from my friend, George Sarris, in his booklet – *How Wide are Heaven’s Doors?* On pages 43 and 44, George writes: *At the very end of the last book of the Bible, we learn of a glorious city that has come down from heaven, filled with beauty that is beyond description. We are told the gates of the city are **always** open. The fruit of the tree of life is always available. Its leaves are for the healing of the nations. And at that time, there will no longer be any curse. Then, Jesus Himself says: “**Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.**” So who are those outside the city who are invited to wash their robes and go through the gates into the city? They’re the same ones who, just a few verses earlier, were said to have their place in the Lake of Fire. Like the Prodigal Son, they are living outside the blessing of their Father. Why? Because those who are ungodly and impure are not allowed to enter through any of the city’s twelve gates – while they remain in that state. But God does not give up on them. In the New Jerusalem, an invitation is given, “**The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come.’ Let the one who is thirsty, come, and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.**” The bride is the body of believers throughout history who are already in the new Jerusalem. They don’t need to wash their robes and eat of the tree of life because they’ve already done so. They’re already in the city. The Spirit and the bride are calling those in the Lake of purifying Fire outside the gates.*

Wonderfully said George from a great booklet! And may I add that the gates will not remain open so that those dwelling in the city may leave to live a life in outer darkness with those who cannot enter the city – the ungodly. Rather, as George stated, the gates are open as an invitation to those who desire to come out of the Lake of Fire. Remember, the Angel who came out from the altar announcing the third harvest, had power over the fire. I believe that messenger is Jesus – the one who holds the keys to death and Hades (Revelation 1:18.) I also believe the gates are open so that those who are a part of His body, may go outside the city as witnesses to encourage those living in outer darkness, to wash their robes and come inside.

3. Those who follow Calvinism and Arminianism must translate the word “aionios,” as “eternal,” to fit their paradigms. It is the Greek term used to describe the length of punishment in the lake of fire, and it is the adjective form of the noun, “aion.” This word is

where we get our English word eon, or age. Our Greek speaking church fathers believed this adjective meant “age-lasting.” This makes sense, because it is an axiom of language that the adjective form of the noun cannot be stronger in scope than the noun itself. I get a **daily** newspaper once a **day** and a **monthly** bill once a **month**. Neither can be described as eternal or everlasting.

Other scholars throughout church history have also written extensively on this word. For example, here’s what Dr. Ilaria Ramelli, Università Cattolica di Milano, and Dr. David Konstan, Brown University, had to say after an exhaustive study on how this word was used before, during, and after the time when the Bible was written, and how the Greeks understood it when used inside and outside of the Bible. This quote comes from their book, *Terms for Eternity: “Apart from the Platonic philosophical vocabulary, which is specific to only a few authors, **aiōnios does not mean “eternal”**; it acquires this meaning only when it referred to God, and only because the notion of eternity was included in the conception of God: for the rest, it has a wide range of meanings and its possible renderings are multiple, **but it does not mean “eternal.”** In particular, when it is associated with life or punishment, it denotes their belonging to the world or age to come. Another term, **aidios**, which always meant “eternal” in the strict sense, according to Jews, Greeks, early Christians, and the Bible, referred exclusively to future life and bliss, but never to future punishment, fire, and the like when applied to mankind.”* (Note: David’s research was on ancient Greek and Latin literature. He is currently a professor of Classics at NYU after spending three decades at Brown, where he remains a John Rowe Workman Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Classics and Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature. I met and heard him speak recently, and I found him to be a very open, kind, and humble Christian man.)

Additionally, Paul knew exactly how to express the idea of “unending,” and he did so in 1 Timothy 1:4 when he urged some of the teachers in Ephesus not to occupy themselves with myths and “endless” (*aperantois*) genealogies. The Greek word means, “no other side; endless,” and every translation I’ve seen agrees with this definition of *aperantois*. Therefore, Paul knew how to convey the notion of something that is without end, but he never used that term when describing future punishment; he only used *aiōnios* the adjective form of aion.

4. The word often translated as “punishment” is remedial in its scope. As an example, *kolasis*, a New Testament term used in connection with future punishment (Mathew 25:46), was always inflicted in the interests of the sufferer, whereas *timoria*, in the interest of him who inflicts it, according to Aristotle. *Timoria* was never used for the punishment of men in the ages to come. Furthermore, the root word behind *kolasis* means *the pruning of a tree*. The idea is clear that trees are pruned to make them more fruitful in the interest of the tree and for others who eat their fruit; we don’t prune trees to make them suffer eternally.

5. Fire – God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29), and everyone will be seasoned with it (Mark 9:49.) We are tested with fire to bring us to rich fulfillment (Psalms 66:10-12.) God will baptize us, all flesh (Joel 2:28), with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Mathew 3:11.) He came to cast fire on the earth (Luke 12:47-49.) We are tested by fire and **saved through it** (1 Corinthians 3:15.) God’s fire refines, purifies, and purges us for our benefit.

The literal “fire” described as “*unquenchable*” in the Old Testament and referred to by Jesus, no longer burns - Jeremiah 17:4,27. However, it could not be put out **UNTIL** it had accomplished its mission. Zephaniah 3:8-9 gives us another perspective of that fire, a figurative fire that is also “*unquenchable*,” until it accomplishes its mission – “*the fire of My jealousy*,” which shall “*plunder*” and “*devour*” all the earth.” Earlier in chapter 1, Zephaniah informed us that “*In the fire of His jealousy the whole earth will be consumed, for He will make a sudden end of ALL who live on earth!*” However, that is followed by “*restoration*,” so “*that all nations may call on the name of the Lord to serve Him with one accord.*” That can only mean “*the end of all who live on earth*” is just as symbolic as “*the fire of His jealousy.*”

If we look close enough, we will find this same pattern of judgment followed by restoration all over the Old Testament, and in verse 17 of chapter 3, we find these profound and prophetic words, words which point to God’s heart and the motivation behind that plundering and devouring fire – “*The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior WHO SAVES. He will take great delight in you: in HIS LOVE He will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.*” That applies to all nations and peoples of the earth. Solomon offers further insight into this unquenchable fire when he requests God to: “*Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love (His) is as strong as death, its jealousy (His) unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters*

cannot quench (His) love” – Song of Solomon 8:6-7. If you think these words only apply to Israel, then, you need to reconsider these verses: Amos 9:7-12 “Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites’ declares the Lord? Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?”

Of course, Israel has a special role in His plan, but God has plans for other nations as well – as a matter of fact – all nations. For example, in Jeremiah 48:4,9, & 42, Moab was to be punished, destroyed and remain desolate. But later, we find them restored in verse 47. The same goes for Ammon and Elam in chapter 49, and for Sodom and Samaria in Ezekiel 16:53,55, and with Egypt and Assyria in Isaiah 19:23-25.

See the pattern? Psalms 86:9,10 – **“All nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name. For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God.”** Maybe the lake of fire is different than we’ve ever imagined. If a lake is a body of water, then it follows that a lake of fire is a body of fire. Maybe this body is symbolically the body of the One who is described throughout scriptures as a consuming fire. If so, all of His enemies will be emersed in Him – who is love.

6. Brimstone - Brimstone is sulfur, and the Greek word for it is *theion*. Its root is *theo*, which is translated as *God*. Sulfur has an atomic number of 16. The number 16 in the Bible is symbolic of never-ending love. Furthermore, sulfur was considered as sacred to the ancient Greeks, and it was used in religious ceremonies to cleanse and purify their temples. They also rubbed it on their bodies to signify consecration to God. *Theou* means to “make divine, or dedicate to God.” Also, according to an article on Georgia Gulf Sulfur Corporation’s web page, sulfur is the workhorse of chemistry. Throughout its history, sulfur (brimstone) has been used to increase the world’s standard of living as a known cleansing agent, purifying agent, preservative, and with a form of it being used in fertilizers for increased production of food.

7. Damnation – a word associated with the lake of fire. Did you know this word was invented by a Latin lawyer named Tertullian, who lived two hundred years after the time of Christ? When you look for damnation in the King James Version of the Bible, you will find it eleven times, yet there is no corresponding word in the Greek New Testament’s vocabulary whose fundamental meaning is damnation. In all eleven cases the Greek word behind “damnation” comes from either *krima* or *krisis*. Both of these words carry the basic idea of

making a decision or judgment. Out of the seventy-five times *krima or krisis* were used, only eleven of them were chosen to be translated as damnation in the KJV, because its use in the other **sixty-four** would render them nonsensical. However, translating all of them with the idea of a decision or judgment being made, makes perfect sense. Tertullian made many other mistakes by inventing and inserting several words that are nowhere to be found in the original language of the scriptures.

8. Hell – Many believe that hell is the lake of fire, a place of eternal conscious torment. If that were true, wouldn't this be vitally important information for all men to know and understand? If so, then a loving God would have made that warning plain to His children right from the beginning. Correct? I mean, for something to be so critical in eternity, He should have warned Adam and Eve right out of the gate. However, that is not the case. All we can find is a warning that the penalty for eating of the tree was death, not eternal life in fire and brimstone.

Furthermore, if eternal hell is real, why didn't the Apostle Paul, who was commissioned to preach to the nations, warn anyone of it in any of his letters? Better yet, why didn't he warn them repeatedly? Didn't Paul say in Acts 20:27 he had declared the entire counsel of God? If eternal hell is real, why isn't hell mentioned even once in the book of Acts in any of the evangelistic sermons that were recorded by the early apostles? As a matter of fact, hell as a translation of *hades* or *gehenna* does not appear in any of the Epistles! Paul never used *gehenna*, and his only reference to *hades* was in celebration of its defeat! Only 2 Peter 2:4 mentions a place called *tartaros* as a temporary holding place for fallen angels.

And does Matthew 25 teach we will be sent to hell for not feeding the hungry or visiting the sick? There is not one mention in this entire passage that "belief in Jesus" is what differentiates the sheep from the goats.

Furthermore, hell cannot be the lake of fire, because hell is thrown into the lake and is destroyed, just like death is destroyed. So, what the hell is hell? Here are some facts from God's Word to consider – Thirty-one references to hell in the O.T. KJV are all translations of *sheol*, meaning "the grave." Those have been corrected in most modern translations. In the KJV, of the twenty-four times hell is mentioned in the N.T., ten come from the translation of *hades*, which is the Greek equivalent for *sheol*, the grave, thirteen come from *gehenna*, a reference to the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem, and one from *tartaros*, a holding place

for fallen angels. Gehenna was a place of shame where the bodies of criminals were tossed after their deaths. It was their grave. Maybe hell is just the grave, a place of shame and contempt for some, and a place that is destroyed when all are made alive after the third harvest.

If the lake of fire is not hell, and not a permanent place, then, what is it? I'll preface my answer with a passage from Isaiah, followed by a story I heard recently, and then add a few quotes from our early Church Fathers. First, Isaiah 1:24-25 – *“Therefore, the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares: “Ah, I will get relief from my foes and avenge myself on my enemies (He is referring to Judah and Jerusalem here.) I will turn my hand against you;”*

Let's PAUSE for a moment . . . What do you think God will do to **get relief** and **revenge** when He **turns against** His enemies – His foes – those that stand against Him? Think about it for a minute or two before you consider God's answer in the remaining part of verse 25: ***“I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove your impurities.”*** **WHAT?** Another translation reads: *“I will turn against you and clean away all your wrongs as if with soap; I will take all the worthless things out of you.”* Was that the answer you were expecting – that God's retribution and wrath is all about the eradication of evil from within? That is why Jesus could say that tax collectors and harlots go into God's kingdom **before** His enemies (the ones in His own household – Israel) get in (Mathew 21:31.) Think about it; they all get in, but in a certain order, and it can only happen after a purging.

Now for a story from Dr. Kim West – *There was once a group of women studying the book of Malachi in the Old Testament. As they were studying chapter three, they came across verse three, which says: “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.” This verse puzzled the women, and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God. One of the women offered to find out about the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible study.*

That week this woman called up a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest beyond her curiosity about the process of refining silver. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot – then she thought again about the verse, that he sits as a refiner and purifier of silver. She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined.

The man answered “Yes”, and explained that he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left even a moment too long in the flames, it would be damaged.

The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, “How do you know when the silver is fully refined?”

He smiled at her and answered, “Oh, that’s easy. When I see my image in it.”

If today you are feeling the heat of this world’s fire, just remember that God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ are refining you. “You are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ.”

Now, I’ll add a few quotes from some of our Church Fathers. Clement of Alexandria (150-213 AD): *“Fire is conceived as a benefit and strong power, destroying what is base, preserving what is good; therefore, this fire is called ‘wise’ by the prophets.”* He further described this fire as *“saving and disciplinary, leading to conversion.”* Origen (180-253 AD): *“As therefore we say God is a consuming fire, what is it that is to be consumed by Him? We say it is wickedness, and whatever proceeds from it, such as figuratively called ‘wood, hay and stubble’ which denote the evil works of man. Our God is a consuming fire in this sense; and He shall come as a refiner’s fire to purify rational nature from the alloy of wickedness and other impure matter which has adulterated the intellectual gold and silver; consuming whatever evil is mixed in all the soul.”* Bishop Titus of Bostra (?-378 AD): *“The punishments of God are holy, as they are remedial and salutary in their effect upon transgressors; for they are inflicted, not to preserve their wickedness, but to make them cease from their sins. The abyss... is indeed the place of punishment, but it is not endless. The anguish of their sufferings compels them to break off from their sins.”*

Since the lake of fire not only destroys evil, but also produces the opposite, the antithesis, of whatever is tossed into it, many see it to be symbolic of the presence of God. As with the face of Moses, and as with Saul’s heart and mind, things change in His presence.

- a. Ex: Death is tossed into it and is destroyed. And how do you destroy death? Answer: **By giving life.**
- b. Hades (the grave) is thrown into it. Hades is a place of darkness, the place of the buried, and the land of the unseen and the unknown. If these are destroyed, then,

what is the opposite output? What destroys these things? Answers in order: Light, things that are uncovered (resurrected), things are seen, and things that are known.

- c. Those who are lost, unbelievers, sinners, enemies of God, and those whose names are not in the Book of Life are also thrown into it. How are each of these destroyed? Answer: By the lost becoming found, unbelievers becoming believers, sinner becoming saints, enemies becoming friends of God, and those whose names are not in the Book of Life receiving new names, which are in that book.
- d. The beast was thrown into it. It is the beast within each one of us that believes we can achieve tranquility and happiness with enough money (Babylon), with enough power (Medes and Persians), with enough wisdom and knowledge (Greece), and with enough control through man-made law (Romans.)
- e. The false prophet is thrown into it. It is the false prophet, who whispered in our minds from the beginning that man is self-sufficient and in control. His lie continues to this day as he tells us that men are justified by their actions and decisions under the law. It is that form of self-righteousness which is destroyed by the power of truth in His presence – for we are justified by the **faith of Jesus** through His work on the Cross alone. Without **His faith**, and without **His work**, there would be no resurrection of the dead for us.

For more information concerning the above points, please watch the very moving You Tube video: *Hallelujah in Hell*. It is awesome.

Paul's Experience in the Lake of Fire

Do any of these results remind you of what happened to a former **enemy of God**, Saul of Tarsus? After **being tossed into the fire of His presence** in his on-the-road-to-Damascus experience, on the other side of it came a believer, a saint, a chief apostle, a friend of God, and one whose new name **is** in the Book of Life. By effect, Jesus destroyed the old Saul and created a new life in Paul. Saul's life was "plundered," "devoured," and "consumed." All of this points to the type of death one experiences in the lake of fire. In Galatians 2:20, Paul put it this way: *"I have been crucified with Christ, and I NO LONGER LIVE, but Christ lives in me."* Unlike Moses, Saul had the same face after his experience, for he didn't catch a backside glimpse, but what God did change was Saul's heart, mind, name, and purpose.

Perhaps this is why God told Moses that “no man shall see me and live” (Ex. 33:19.) Maybe God said that because Moses, the man the Egyptians and Israelites knew, would have physically changed after being made complete in His image and likeness. Maybe God was simply giving us a **glimpse** of what happens to us in His presence, because it wasn’t time for a full reveal. Maybe Moses needed to fulfill his destiny as Moses the man, for his training and ours. I’ve never been comfortable with the idea that God’s goodness literally kills a person. No, I believe His goodness changes us into a new person with a divine character like our Father’s.

Back to Paul – In Timothy, Paul proclaimed he received mercy so that God could put on display His patience, “so that I might be **the first outline sketch**” of others who would follow. What? Others may follow his path of blasphemy and all manner of unrepentant sin followed by a time spent in a place of **total darkness** where there was weeping and probably some gnashing of teeth? One Bible commentator put it this way: There, “Saul was thinking, ‘I’m a dead man.’”

We can only imagine the anguish he felt with thoughts of what he knew he deserved **under the Law**. Would his blindness be permanent? Would he remain forever in darkness? With those fears, he did not eat or drink for three days.

His experience began with a bright light (the brightness of His coming.) Then, he heard a voice from Heaven, and then came his judgment as an enemy of Christ. That sequence follows the pattern for those destined for the lake of fire. At our Lord’s coming, they hear the voice of God and are raised to judgment. However, the “outline sketch” did not stop there, for repentance, forgiveness, and restoration followed. Saul’s three days as an **enemy** in the fire wasn’t pleasant, but on the other side of it, came a new creature, just like it will be for others cast into the second death.

And I don’t think it is a coincidence that Paul spent **three days** in darkness before His healing – his restoration into newness of life. I believe this was another signal concerning how this group would have to wait for the first two groups to be harvested. Even though Saul had a limited free will, God, from the beginning of time, foreordained a plan which would cause him to rethink his previously held erroneous beliefs as an enemy of Christ. This plan was prearranged in a precise three-day sequence, and now we can see what may be in store for those in the third and final harvest. Let’s look at a few more details in the outline.

Saul was on the road to “Damascus,” a word which means, “**silent is the sackcloth weaver.**” The sackcloth weaver was a person who made clothes for penitence to be worn in humility for misdeeds and poor behavior. Saul was traveling to a Gentile capital to arrest believers, but the

silent sackcloth maker was waiting for him there, and would recommission him with a completely opposite goal. That's what the lake of fire does. Saul, whose name meant, "one who asks or inquires of God," would be asking in humility for the sackcloth, once he was exposed to the truth.

The lake of fire is a place of repentance and humility. He was led meekly by the hand to the house of Judas on Straight Street in the city of the Divine Silent Sackcloth Weaver, where his thinking would be straightened out, and his blinded eyes would be opened. One of the guys he came to arrest, Ananias, would pray and ask God to restore his sight. Ananias means "God has been gracious," and the name, Judas, means "praise."

Here in the lake of fire, Saul finds grace, not eternal damnation or annihilation, **because the lake is not a permanent destination; it's just a passing phase, and Paul left it to become God's chief apostle!** In this, his place of darkness becomes a house of praise, because an enemy's dross and impurities were removed, just as promised in Isaiah 1:24-25. His new name, Paul, means small or little. He has been made small, or humbled in his state of tribulation. It is beyond coincidence that the word, "tribulation" comes from the Greek word "thlipsis," which means, "to press," and is associated with the pressing of grapes in a winepress!

With this knowledge, Romans 2:9 reads: *"There will **be tribulation (pressing) and anguish for every soul who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.**"* The Greek word for anguish means "placed in a small space," implying there's no room for mental maneuvering anymore! It's over; it is finished. Isn't that exactly what happened to Mr. Small - I mean Paul? With this knowledge, Revelation 7:14 reads: *"These are the ones who came out of the great tribulation (pressing, being made small), and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."*

What does this say about God's judgments? They are remedial, not just punitive; they serve divine purposes beyond our mortal reach; they are good and far surpassing human expectations. Remember, the first part of God's communion is to serve bread from the barley and wheat harvests, but His communion is not complete until the grapes, His enemies, have been harvested as well. Isaiah 30:18 – *"Therefore, the Lord **waits** to be gracious to you; therefore, He exalts Himself to show mercy to you, **for** (because) **the Lord is a God of JUSTICE.**"* God's justice manifests itself in the form of grace and mercy, even to His enemies.

Julie Ferwerda made some interesting observations that each crop needed a different process when it came to removing the chaff, that which is not wanted. Barley was winnowed (a

light blowing) while wheat was threshed (a more vigorous process.) However, the grapes were sent to the wine press (the most vigorous process of all) to remove its flesh from the byproduct.

I'll close out my answer, to what is the lake of fire, with these last comments. In the Book of Revelation, we find the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven **as a bride**. We are told those on the outside of the city – the ungodly who are in the lake of fire – are unable to enter into the city for the wedding feast celebration. But evidently, they ran out of wine at the wedding feast. So, what does Jesus do? He turns those in the lake, the grapes, into wine. At the harvest of those grapes, we are told *“the winepress was trodden outside the city and the blood (His) flowed as high as a horse’s bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia.”* (Revelation 14:20.) The distance mentioned here is the length of the country of Israel.

Since Jesus said a man’s enemies were those of His own household, and since Israel was the country He came to minister to, and since they rejected Him, a picture can be drawn where we see **His blood covering the land of His enemies. And in the very next verse**, Revelation 15:1, we are informed: **“the wrath of God is ended.”**

We can also draw another picture from these words. What is a lake? Answer: a body of water? What is the blood? Answer: His wine. Effectively, the blood and the wine are the same. Here, we see Jesus in this final harvest turning the water in the lake into wine, which covered the land of His enemies, and in doing so, He **“saved” the best** (His first and number one miracle) **for last** (the last group.)

Notice in our Lord’s first miracle done in Cana, the city in Israel where Jesus turned water into wine, we are told that those who tasted that wine said the **bridegroom** had departed from the custom, and saved the best for last. In other words, He departed from the custom of the day (the law), and gave grace – new life – to what seemed to be dead and lost forever. My friend, Paul, put it succinctly this way: “God has the ability to transform ‘disaster’ into a wonderful gift. Fire will cleanse a forest to enable new growth.”

Also notice, how Jesus performed this miracle, when He transformed all six containers of ordinary water into the best wine, on the **third day** of the feast. “Six” symbolizes mankind, human weakness, and the evils of sin. **Jesus saved, what men will consider His best work, for the last!**

It is also interesting how Jesus performed His first recorded healing from Cana. In John 4:46-54, we find a nobleman from the court of Herod Antipas seeking Jesus for the healing of his son. His son was living **outside the city** of Cana in Capernaum. About Capernaum, Jesus once said: *“And*

thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell (Hades): for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day" (KJV of Mathew 11:23.) In that place in Hades, the nobleman's son is in a state of death **burning up** with a fever. From the city where Jesus turned the water into wine, He pronounces healing for the boy. We then find out the healing took place at the seventh hour, symbolic of the last day in God's creation story, where all, including the son in the fire, is pronounced "good," and when God finishes His work and mankind enters into the day of God's rest. At that point, we are told the nobleman's entire family, who also lived in Capernaum, became believers.

The Three Heavens

In the Bible, the number "3" signifies "divine completeness and perfection," and in summary, we've found three groups of men, three feast celebrations, three harvests, three crops, and three vivifications at three different times. Consequently, we can now understand what Paul meant when he said he was caught up to the third heaven. And just what makes these three heavens different? I believe this perspective informs us that the only difference between them is the size of their population as a result of what has been harvested.

This perspective was about timing, and it had nothing to do with space. As a matter of fact, the Greek word translated "to" in the phrase "caught up to the third heaven," actually means *unto* or *until*, as in James 5:7: "be patient... *until* the coming of the Lord." I am now convinced that Paul was caught up to a time after the third harvest of people, a time when everyone had finally been reconciled, and God had become *all in all*.

We are not told of any neon signs flashing "**THIRD HEAVEN, THIRD HEAVEN, THIRD HEAVEN,**" when Paul arrived, or an angelic elevator operator announcing an arrival on the third floor with its fine selections of wine. Paul called it the third heaven because he saw and heard men and women praising God who were from the third harvest, and all others **in heaven** from the first two harvests, praising Him with great joy for the third harvest – Luke 15:7.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12: 4 states "*that a man was caught away to the paradise, and heard things that cannot be told, that it is not possible, permissible, or lawful for a man to speak.*" Here, Paul used the third person to tell this story as "*a man,*" and he did so to reinforce what he had said in the verses directly above – namely, he would boast only of things **that showed his weakness**. Why? Because he was attempting to prove his credentials to the Corinthians, and the

demonstration of heavenly wonders in his life, like deliverance, revelations, and visions, occurring during times of his weakness, would serve as proof of the power of God in his life. He then relayed two stories. In verse 3, Paul said he “knew/remembered” this man of the **past**, and one writer described the relaying of Paul’s story as “apologetic” in tone.

The first story is where he had to run away as a fugitive in the night, where he was let down a wall through a window in a basket, something William Barclay described as “worse than a scourging” for a personality like Paul, who would rather not run away. The second story starts with him boasting again, and then, he states there is nothing he will gain by it. Why? Because it displayed further weakness! **But where is the weakness in this story?** And why aren’t we looking for it?

And what could be so good, that it would be “**unlawful**” to speak about? We’ve already been told that we will be raised from the dead, forgiven, that we will receive immortality, a new body, there will be no more pain and suffering, and no more tears. And for the more carnally-minded, like me 😊, there will be mansions, streets of gold, pearly gates, and Blue Bell Ice Cream (I hope.) What else could we want or need, and what makes all this good stuff “unlawful” to speak about?

Who told Paul what he heard was unlawful for “a man” (referring to his former self) to speak about? The elevator operator? An angel? Jesus? God Almighty Himself? From the text, we aren’t informed. Maybe, that’s because it’s not **who** told him, but **what** was telling him in the past that it was unlawful for him to speak. Maybe his former training was the source.

Unlawful means something not conforming to, or recognized by, or in harmony with **the law**. I submit that it was grace that was not in harmony with the works of the law, making it unthinkable or unutterable in Paul’s mind during his early years of training. **That was the weakness he was somewhat apologetically boasting about!** Paul was just like us! He didn’t receive a complete understanding of all scriptures on the first day of his conversion. He had to learn as any man, just like you and me. Were you born with your present knowledge, or did you have to struggle – read, study, ask, and pray? Paul had preconceived junk burned in his brain too – stuff that he needed to get rid of. He was “a man” in this vision; **he was that man!**

As a Pharisee of Pharisees, Paul had been taught that entry into God’s kingdom was based upon the decisions and actions of a man under the law. **But justifying the ungodly by God’s gracious acts alone**, was not in harmony with man’s work under the law (Rom. 4:5), nor with man’s

ego and desire to be self-sufficient and autonomous – to be his own god. This was Paul’s weakness going into the vision – **an incomplete knowledge of grace.**

Here, Paul boasts about that weakness, and acknowledges how he, miraculously, by the power of God in a stunning vision, came to a new understanding. Romans 8:13 – “*but now we are delivered from the law.*” Hebrews 8:13 – “*what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish.*” Grace may have been a possibility in the back of Paul’s mind during his early training, but now he would receive confirmation and confidence from on high in that vision!

In the first story, Paul was provided a window of hope and let down a barrier in a basket attached to a rope, his lifeline to safety. In the second story, God allowed him to go through another window into the future, where he could see himself and other enemies like him, rescued from a second death. This time he escaped in the basket of grace, attached to a rope – his lifeline to safety. Death was on the other side of that barrier – the covenant of the law. Jesus provided the basket and the rope. He was the One doing all the work; Paul was simply there for the ride.

I don’t think that we, in the 21st century, can possibly understand how **huge** this change was for an Israelite, and Paul needed this confirmation to be able to carry out his mission, even unto his death. **Clyde Pilkington: “This special gospel committed specifically and singularly to Paul (thus, ‘my gospel’) stands in contrast to the law. It is this good news that God will one day gloriously use as the standard to judge the world (Romans 2:16.)”** It’s the gospel of grace and peace manifested in what I believe Paul heard in that vision – God’s former enemies confessing that Jesus is Lord and giving God glory (credit) for raising Him and them from the dead.

And isn’t it strange, after the Holy Spirit falls, men start speaking in tongues they previously knew nothing about, words they could not speak previously, because in their brain they had no knowledge of them. These words were unutterable to them, reminding me of what Paul heard while in paradise after the third harvest. When the unthinkable, the unutterable, the unimaginable occurs, all people will be praising Him in words they previously could not express, because they had no understanding of it. The words are like a foreign language to them – God saving the unsavable, doing what they thought was impossible!

Just like Paul, other men will also have to learn the power of His grace. It took me thirty-three years for God to confirm it in the weakness of my mind, even after a stunning vision at the age of seven. For now, those that see only two harvests, adding the third is not permissible; it remains in the category of “unlawful to speak about,” according to their limited knowledge.

Will God Save All?

Romans 10:9 is a favorite of those who believe that God can't save all, including His former enemies: *"that if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."* Yes, it says "if," because it is very important for all to recognize that Jesus is Lord and that we give God honor or credit (glory) for raising Him. So, if everyone is to be saved, we must find some place(s) in scripture demonstrating both "if" conditions being met by everyone.

How about Philippians 2:10-11? *'That at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, and those on earth, and those under the earth, and that every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.'*

Note: Unfortunately, some very prominent translations use "should" instead of "shall" in this Philippians passage. This is **highly misleading!** The use of "should" infers that people should bow and confess that Jesus is Lord, but may not. **This is far from the case!** Verse 10 begins with the Greek word "*Hina*," translated "That." It means "in order that," or "so that." According to BAGD (a Biblical Greek dictionary), Dr. Daniel Wallace, and others, the use of *hina* here "indicates the intention and **its sure accomplishment.**" **This is confirmed by John 3:16** – "that (*hina*) whosoever believeth in Him, **"should"** (?) not perish but have everlasting life (KLV) – No, **"shall."** **The construction of this purpose-result clause is to convey what God purposes, is what happens, expressing divine purpose and the end result.** There is no uncertainty as to the fate of the believer, just as there is no question as to what **will** happen to every knee and every tongue.

1 Corinthians 12:3 states that **"No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."** Furthermore, the word translated as "confess" is "exomologeō." In all other cases where this term is used, or a form of it is used, whatever is being confessed, is done **willfully**. In Luke 10:21, Jesus used this word to confess with thanksgiving: "I **thank** thee Father." All of this is confirmed in Romans 14:11 – "every knee **will** bow . . . every tongue **will** confess."

Therefore, in these Philippian verses, we find both conditions in Romans 10:9 being met by everyone! The first one is satisfied when every tongue confesses that Jesus is Lord. The second one is fulfilled when everyone gives God glory (honor or credit) for raising Jesus from the dead and making Him **Lord!** There are no other conditions or timing restrictions mentioned in Romans 10:9. **It would be false advertising to find more stipulations at checkout.**

Isaiah 45:22-26 also confirms the same result found in Philippians 2:10-11. This promise is straight from God's mouth to our ears: *"Look to me and be saved, **all ye ends** of the earth! For I am God and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself; the word has gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, that to me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall take an oath. He shall say, '**Surely in the Lord I have righteousness and strength.**'"*

Psalms 86:9 also confirms God's declaration above with: *"all nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord, and shall glorify Thy name."* And why do they come to worship and glorify His name? Because they are ecstatic about the results for everyone. **Their former state of darkness has turned into a house of praise!**

John 12:32 records these words from Jesus: *"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, **will draw all men unto Me.**"* The Greek word "draw" also carries the meaning "to drag," as with a net. This is why a fish is the perfect symbol for Christianity. Jesus said He would make His disciples *"fishers of men."* Obviously, by nature fish don't want to be caught in a net, so they run away from it, just like Adam and Eve did in the Garden, when *"they hid themselves from His presence."* That is why Jesus provided the solution to our avoidance issue. He would draw all men to Himself, as He did for you and me, and as He did for the ones who ran away from Him at the Crucifixion. He draws us into a net woven in the fabric of grace – **the net of His Love.** And as Thomas Talbott put it, His love (the net) **is inescapable.** Once our hearts are captured by it, **knees bow, tongues confess . . . willfully . . . thankfully.**

This is why no human being will be able to boast in His presence (1 Cor. 1:29), because we didn't choose Him; He chose us. Romans 5:18 gives us a clear picture of Jesus taking full responsibility and total ownership of the end result: *"as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so **one man's** act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for (the same) all men."*

Two Covenants – One Defective; One Corrective

Acquittal and life for all men? **Many do not see this as a possibility because their mindset is still grinding under the old covenant of the Law with their focus on the actions of the creature, instead of on the actions of the Creator.** Under that jurisprudence, both parties had to keep their end of the deal to make it work. *"If **you** do this . . . **He** will do that."*

As an historical demonstration to show how this approach would not work, God put Israel on display, and the old covenant failed. It failed because they could not keep their end of the

bargain. However, God replaced the old one with a failsafe covenant called Grace. It will not fail, because it would rely solely on the actions of one man – **Jesus, who did the will of the Father!** With the focus on Jesus rather than ourselves, pastor Peter Hiett encourages us with these words of wisdom: **“Start glorifying Jesus and stop worshipping Me-sus.”**

Continuing to view the new covenant of Grace through the lens of a defunct one, will blur our vision of the new. For Christians, it leads to mixing the two covenants, which is at best, less productive, or at worse, totally destructive. Jesus warned all that mixing the two covenants would ruin the lessons we were to learn about ourselves in the first, and our Creator in the second. In fact, Jesus gave two illustrations born of everyday life to stress that keeping these two covenants separate is a must before God. You can either trust in His love, His abilities, and His grace, or you can rely on your ability to keep the Law, but you can't do both.

In Mathew 9:16-17 Jesus said: *“No one puts a piece of new cloth onto an old garment; for that which is put in to fill up takes from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; else the wineskins burst, and the wine runs out, and the wineskins perish. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved together.”*

In another passage, Jesus warned us to *“beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:6.)”* Some say leaven was symbolic of sin. That may be true, but why did Jesus single out the leaven of these two groups? He could have used the sin of anyone.

To make a long story short, it turns out this leaven was what both groups taught. The Pharisees taught that entrance into God's Kingdom would be based on a man's ability to fulfill the Law – man's own righteousness; the mindset of self-sufficiency. As far as the Sadducees, it was more of the same, and I do mean more. They taught self-sufficiency to the extreme, even to the point of denying God's involvement in everyday life. They were borderline atheists.

Independence and self-reliance are good things. As leaven makes bread rise, these traits also make a woman or a man rise to the top in everyday life. However, they won't be enough for our justification. Our efforts, our righteousness, will fall short, just as it did with Israel. But the good news is: He will gladly give all of us His righteousness. That's the new covenant!

Have you ever wondered why God told the Israelites to get rid of their leaven seven days prior to their exit from Egypt at the time of Passover? If leaven was merely symbolic of sin, why wouldn't He tell them to get rid of it, period? What is the real reason they weren't allowed to use yeast during this time?

Yeast is a good thing; it makes the bread more palatable and easier to eat than bread made without it. And bread made with yeast looks more inviting too. The answer: **In the arena of salvation, self-reliance – the yeast which puffs up a man, won't be able to bring us out of Egypt (the world) and take us to the Promised Land.**

Jesus was crucified at Passover, and He is the only One who can and will provide what we need to get us there. The only way to the Father's Kingdom is through the Son. Jesus is the Way; the only Way. There is no room for leaven – our self-righteousness in salvation's equation.

Will good people make it to heaven? Sure. But they won't be there because of their goodness; they will be there because of His. This is the message behind the two covenants. And the end result of what Jesus did on the Cross was *"acquittal and life for all men."* Let's celebrate! Better yet, let's relax and celebrate!

Consider Luke 7:28 where Jesus said, *"Among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."* How can that be except for grace being granted in the kingdom to those like me, those who are now nowhere near the caliber of man that John was while he walked on this earth? In other words, only the covenant of Grace could make this a possibility. The least and the greatest in God's kingdom did not earn it.

Paul puts another twist to this good news of grace when he took the Gospel to the nations. He explained that, so far as God is concerned, He prefers people who are trusting in His goodness and not working at all, over people who work all the time but have no trust in His goodness to reconcile sinners. Romans 4:4-5 *"But to him working, the reward is not reckoned according to grace, but according to debt. But to him not working, **but believing on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.**"*

What does the one not working believe about God? Answer: He believes that God can and will **justify the ungodly**. That is why he is not working! He knows he doesn't have to work for it; he knows no one else does either! In contrast, the one working does not believe that God can and will justify the ungodly, **because he believes it's up to man whether he becomes justified or not**. That is why he is working – to feel justified by his actions and decisions, and to help others feel justified by their actions and decisions. This is called mixing the two covenants. Here's Peter Hiett in one of his best quotes: **"We need to stop "shoulding" on ourselves."**

Sadly, most of Christianity today is just a modified version of Judaism with our focus on the creature, instead of the Creator. Mathew 7:22 warns about what happens when we focus on our works, instead of what He has done for us.

C. Pilkington: "Today, for most, the Adversary has successfully pawned off Israel's former hope as ours, to the great distraction in, and detriment to, the lives of the saints." The joy provided by Grace quickly evaporates under the bondage of the Law. How dimly many Christians view the heart of God and the outcome of His plan. **They are unable to rest in His goodness, because they see man's will defeating God's will in most of humanity.** Yet God has not been silent about His plans to be 100% successful!

A Declaration, Not A Negotiation

There are many, many scriptures that speak of the totality of Christ's victory (Psalms 22:27-29, 65:2-3, 72:11, 15, 138:4, 145:8-16: Is 25:6-8, 40:5, 52:10, Daniel 7:14, Joel 2:28, Zephaniah 3:9 just to name a few in the Old Testament alone), but the few scriptures we quoted in the above paragraphs should provide sufficient evidence for Jesus truly being the Savior of the world.

For those who have yet not apprehended the third harvest, the thought of all being forgiven and justified, is *unutterable* to them. Maybe they will have to wait and experience the third heaven before their eyes are finally opened – just as it was in the case of Paul.

But God is not worried or frustrated by His kid's temporary lack of knowledge. He knew in advance how His people would miss this good news, and He actually predicted our dilemma when He told the church through Paul in Ephesians 2: 7-10: *"in the ages to come (the future) He will show (by action because of poor understanding now) the exceeding riches (beyond what was expected – a third harvest – the grapes) of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace (unmerited favor) you have been saved (harvested) through faith, and that not of yourself, it is the gift (free gift) of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."* For we (the barley, wheat, and grapes) are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand (previously arranged in the harvests) that we should walk in them.

Crops are crops by His design; it's the natural order of things. It is in the plant's DNA to be who they are, and no amount of effort by the plant can change their identity. That's why there will be no boasting! **The fact is that He loves all of us**, whether barley, wheat, or grape, and for that

reason, He became the Savior of the world, the One who will harvest all the crops for His enjoyment and pleasure.

As minister Phil Henry reminds us: **“Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world” was a proclamation – not an invitation; it was a declaration – not a negotiation; it is not something to be debated!** And this is exactly what Jesus told Nicodemus when He compared spiritual birth to physical birth. No one had a choice to be born or not; that decision was made in an act of love long before anyone breathed their first breath. God decided before the foundation of the world that all of His children would be spiritually born again.

Every child was desired – none of us were accidents, and our spiritual births were decided before the beginning of time. When we finally acknowledge that our entry into God’s kingdom was based on **His decision and His righteousness**, all forms of self-righteousness will be destroyed in a very small space as we discover this truth – **His love was the catalyst for our salvation, and our confession was simply the end result.**

Once mankind is finally able to see their place in God’s plan, they will also see their role as He used all of His groups to teach the difference between good and evil, the difference between law and grace, and the difference between the old heavens and earth which are to be replaced with something better—the new heavens and earth. When all is said and done, I believe the barley will understand how they could have just as easily been a grape, and grapes could have just as easily been barley, or wheat.

In this, we will understand that vessels chosen for honor or dishonor in this short life had roles to play for the overall benefit of humanity’s training, and He loved them all equally. As any good parent, God shows no favoritism nor partiality toward any of His offspring – Deuteronomy 10:17, 2 Chronicles 19:7, Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, and Ephesians 6:9.

If God’s form of hatred towards Esau, in choosing one deceitful and unworthy brother over another unworthy brother, meant blessings over a lifetime for Esau, for he did not need what Jacob offered him as gifts, because he had plenty, and meant a restored relationship with his brother in love and reconciliation with kissing, hugging and weeping (Genesis 33:4), and it reaches a climax with the salvation of both of them in one of the three harvests, then, what does that say about **HIS LOVE** for Esau? What does this say about His love for both of them, and what does this say about His love for all of us?

I believe Jacob's and Esau's stories were designed to be object lessons about humanity's need for grace, no matter our position in this life. For me, at times, my actions have fit the character of both of them, for I am a sinner, unworthy of His blessings, unworthy of His love, saved by grace alone, and basking in it every day! How about you?

If God chose to elect a man who participated in the murder of innocent followers of Jesus, a traitor to his own heritage, a Pharisee of Pharisees, and a proclaimed "enemy of God," to be His chief apostle, over others who we would have considered more honorable, then, it was done to emphasize the fact that none of us are righteous or deserving and **that He is in control**. And because **God is in control**, He made Himself responsible for the harvest of all.

In accomplishing His will, He uses people, and as Paul explains in Romans, God's choosing of you and me (predestination) had nothing to do with our righteousness as compared to others. Rather, it had everything to do with demonstrating His greatest work – turning objects deserving of His wrath into vessels of His mercy. We are left with nothing more to do than marvel at His love and become willing and humble servants as we participate in His magnificent plan to redeem all. During our training, vessels of honor and dishonor are easily shaped by reinforcing His presence in our lives, or by allowing the delusion of His absence.

*"But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, yes, and things which are not, to bring to nothing things that are: that **no flesh** should glory in His presence" (I Corinthians 1:27-29.)*

Clyde Pilkington: "The Lord Jesus Christ was the Son of God; but the one who had the distinguished role of being His earthly "father" was Joseph. A simple man, and from all earthly perception, he was what we might call an average "Joseph" - or an average "Joe." He was a lowly carpenter; making our Lord *the son of an average Joe*. This was not an accident, for it is indeed our Father's method. The Father does not plan and build spiritual life upon social prestige, honor, respect and position. He has made clear the divine method: *"For you see your calling, brothers, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called"* (I Corinthians 1:26.)"

Recognizing God's unmerited favor on her, Mary responded perfectly with: *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in **God my Savior**, for He has regarded the low estate of*

His handmaiden. . . for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.” Luke 1:46-49.

Where Our Stories Fit In

I believe the words of Jesus to Peter found in the last verses of John’s Gospel were also recorded for us to consider His ability to mold and shape us, even in our weaknesses. Right after Peter admitted he didn’t have the right stuff to be able to love Jesus with the kind of sacrificial love that Peter desired to possess, Jesus promised to develop him (make him into a rock), and in his old age, Peter would have the right kind of love to fulfill his calling.

Peter must have been elated at that point, and then he asked the Lord about his close friend, John. Jesus replied that if He wanted John to remain alive until He returned again, then, that had nothing to do with Peter’s destiny as a martyr. The facts are that Peter was crucified, and John died of old age in Ephesus, the only apostle to die peaceably. Each had a calling, and each fulfilled their destiny in Christ as God designed for them with unmerited favor.

Furthermore, if God is just and fair, then, your story, when completed, will be one for the ages, just like Peter’s, Paul’s, John’s, Joseph’s, and Mary’s. And all of us will want to hear every detail of it. You are that special!

Dr. Dan Allender, in his book, *The Healing Path*, challenges Christians to recall, because every one of us has a *unique* story of God's redemptive intervention in our lives. Whether we realize it or not, God is telling a story, His story in us. He is intimately involved in every moment of your day. Allender describes how God orchestrates and tells our story as the author and narrator. “Faith increases to the degree that we are caught up, enthralled by, and participating in His story in ours.” He reminds us that approximately 70% of the Bible is written in narrative form.

Allender: “God is a story-teller who weaves His presence into every story in the Bible. And how does He God tell a story? With drama. He tells stories that excite, confuse, entice, disrupt, and change the human heart. Drama involves a beginning, with a setting, characters, and a search or problem to be solved, then, a middle with a plot that has moments of tragedy that brings a rise in tension and risk that demands faith, then an ending that instills confidence and invigorates hope.”

If we realize His story in ours, we can confidently face any challenge in life, no matter the difficulty, because we know what awaits us beyond this moment. His goodness and overwhelming intelligence are the drivers behind what will be nothing short of a miraculous outcome.

Our Father's intent to make His children in His image and likeness is motivated by pure love, and I don't think there is anyone who has fully apprehended His heart, nor can comprehend and His intellectual brilliance. I call His goodness and intelligence "***The Brightness Around Him.***" As the Father of all (Matthew 23:9 & Ephesians 4:6), He is the perfect parent. God knows exactly how his children think, and He knows in advance our every move. After all, He made us, and He knows what makes us tick.

Dr. Thomas Talbott used an analogy of us playing a game of chess with the Grand Master. Even though we are blessed with a free will to make any move we desire, the Grand Master will eventually bring the novice to checkmate, just like He did with Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Mary, Paul . . . and you, and me. Talbott adds: "God could no more choose to create persons without accepting that responsibility than human parents can choose to raise children without acquiring an obligation to promote their welfare." The only difference between Him and us as parents is that He will be 100% successful knowing exactly what to do to bring every child to maturity. He loses none.

Jesus put it this way in the 15th chapter of Luke, verses 4-7: "*What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, **UNTIL HE FINDS IT?** And when he has found it, he lays it on **HIS SHOULDERS**, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep **WHICH WAS LOST.**' Just so, I tell you, there will be more **joy in heaven** over one sinner who repents (whether barley, wheat, or grape) than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."*

In this, we see Jesus taking full responsibility for the lost sheep. He lays them on **His SHOULDERS**, just as He did with the Cross of Calvary.

"*The Lord is . . . **not willing** that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9.) This is why Jesus tells us the **one sinner** who repents is the **one lost sheep** who He goes after until He finds it. He rescues it from perishing in the wilderness, because **the Lord is not willing** to lose even **one!** That is why He ends up with not 99, but 100%.

On the Cross, Jesus took full responsibility and delivered us from the curse of the law (Romans 7:6), because He knew no man could be justified by it (Romans 3:20.) We needed a new covenant – the covenant of grace, and our heavenly Father knew it. As the supreme provider for His family, He made it happen.

On the Cross, mercy triumphed over justice (James 2:13), because in God's plan, from the beginning, the Law was put in a coffin (the Ark), signifying the future death of that covenant, and

the Mercy Seat was placed above it. Mercy literally covered the Law (Exodus 2:21.) Could He possibly have drawn a clearer picture?

Furthermore, the laws of redemption found in the 25th chapter of Leviticus instructs the nearest kinsman to **COME BACK** and redeem what his relative had lost. Dr. Jones: “If the redeemer has the power to redeem, the law says he is commanded by the will of our Father in heaven to redeem what his brother has lost.”

Also, the master of an indebted bondservant **could not keep the one enslaved**, for the kinsman had the right of redemption. Jesus, born in the likeness of men, became our near kinsman and paid all of our debts on the Cross. He has His Father’s direction, authority, and means to redeem all. And above all, **He has the heart to do it!**

I Timothy 2:3-4 expresses God’s desire: *“This is good and pleases God our Savior, who will have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.”* Jeremiah 9:24 adds: *“I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, **for in these things I delight.**”* The Living Bible translates that last phrase as: *“**I love to be this way.**”* He loves to be kind; He loves to fix things; He loves to make things right, and He is highly capable of doing it.

God’s Righteousness and Sense of Justice

I can almost hear the objection to all of this wonderful news for those who hold the first two views of what love’s victory will finally achieve: “But what about God’s sense of justice? What about Judgment Day?”

First, let’s speak briefly about God’s sense of justice. It’s very important to understand that “justice” and “righteousness” are translations from the same Hebrew word, *tsadaq*. It’s the same in the Greek as well, where one word, *dikaio*s, can also be translated as justice or righteousness. This means that God’s justice and His righteousness are one and the same.

Santo Calarco, in his book, *Amazed by Grace*, also informs us that the root word in Hebrew for justice/righteousness means *to be in correct working order*. Leviticus 19:36 demands: “You shall have *just* weights and balances.” *The Complete Word Study Old Testament* defines the same word, 6663 in Strong’s, as to be (make) right – to cleanse or clear.” However, as Christopher Marshall explained, when we think of righteousness, our English minds tend to think of it strictly as some form of private ethical purity, while we associate justice with our judicial sense of fairness in a public court of law. But there is another facet to God’s righteousness/justice that needs more

consideration. Getting things back into working condition, making things right, cleansing and clearing, which is in effect restoring, is at the root of God's righteousness and justice. For example, Romans 1:15-17 defines the Gospel that saves as the righteousness/justice of God. These attributes are rarely emphasized because our Western minds are too busy thinking about God's moral purity and how He will make sure the bad guys get what's coming to them one day.

I believe God gave Santo Calarco another great example, and he relayed the story at the beginning of chapter three in his book, the one we referred to above. Santo has a friend named Tony, who is a mechanical engineer. His job was to monitor petrol pumps to ensure they were *just*. If not, he had to make the necessary repairs. Tony was referred to as a "**Justifier**." Tony's job was not to *justify* himself, because he was already well qualified and had proven he could do the job. His job was to *justify what he was working on*. And when Tony refers to himself as a Justifier, he is not beating his chest bragging about how morally pure he is, although he may be a fine person; Tony is merely letting us know what his job is all about – fixing petrol pumps.

Similarly, God is our mechanical engineer, and He is more than able to *justify* us. When He speaks of His justice/righteousness, He is not beating His chest letting us know how ethically pure He is; we already know that! What He is letting us know is something about His personality, what He is like. He loves to fix things, and He is good at it! Romans 4:5 tells us that He is the *justifier* of the ungodly – people who are not in good working condition.

Let's stop for a moment and consider the difference between God's sense of justice versus man's in the case of murder. We say justice has been served when the perpetrator has been caught, convicted, sentenced, and put in jail, or put to death. That's the best we can do because our justice is limited. However, God has the ability and desire to do so much more than we can even imagine. First, He can and will raise to life the one taken from us, thereby extending **eternal** blessings with restored relationships lost temporarily in this life. Furthermore, after fixing and correcting that side of the justice equation better than it was before, on the other side of justice, He eventually brings the convicted one to true repentance. Then, He restores by clearing, cleansing, and certifying that the person is back in good working condition. He does His job with confidence and promises to eventually restore even the nation of Israel, and all other nations and peoples who have rejected Him in the past. God's sense of justice is not complete until He fixes, heals, and saves all.

Again, because of our limitations, man's tendency is to think of justice as being served strictly with a mindset "under the law." It's the old "eye for an eye" and "payback" type of justice.

However, because Jesus paid for our sins, Paul was able to say: *“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets”* – Romans 3:21.

Israel was the only nation put “under the Law” for their training, and later, for ours through their testimony. God’s law simply acted like a mirror, where they could clearly see their sins and inability to keep the law. Are we Gentiles not the same? Under the Law we are all condemned, but under the new justice system, He decided to make things right by paying off our debts, and fixing us permanently into His image and likeness. This was His intention from the beginning.

Notice how this new system of justice (grace) was *“witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.”* God’s character and passion for making us like Him has not changed and will not change, until He completes us. His will, will be done, and that seemingly impossible task will be finished when His justice/righteousness fixes both sides of the justice equation. That is why professor G.E. Ladd informs us that righteousness is more about “a relationship rather than an ethical quality . . . Basically, ‘righteousness’ is a concept of *relationship* . . . It is not just a word designating personal ethical character, but faithfulness to a relationship.”

Santo Calarco: “Justice-righteousness focuses on relationship. God is shown to keep His covenant and maintain relationships and this in the face of very bad human behavior! Nehemiah 9:33 – *‘In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous (tsadaq); you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly’* . . . He keeps His word regardless of our behavior. Justice in the Bible is about God, the judge, intervening to rescue, save and deliver.”

Isaiah 51:5 – *“My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations.”*

Psalms 71:2 – *“In your righteousness, rescue me and deliver me; turn your ear to me and save me.”*

Isaiah 30:18 – *“Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore, He will rise up to show you compassion. For (because) the Lord is a God of justice.”*

Romans 3:23,24 – *“Since all have sinned and fall short (deficient) of the glory of God; they are now justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”*

Matthew 12:17-21 – *“This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah (Jesus had just healed a large group of people): ‘Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my spirit upon Him, and he will declare justice (Strong’s - a decision, judgment, by implication - justice) to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his*

*voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he casts out or brings out (from the **treasury of His heart** – see verse 35) **justice** (His form of justice) **in** (total and complete) **victory**. In his name the nations will put their **hope**.”*

It is clear – God’s passionate love, patience, gentleness, kindness, and determination wins the day. **No matter if in this life we deny His existence, His intellectual superiority, and/or His goodness, His relationship with us remains unchanged.** His love is inescapable and His justice/righteousness is unstoppable. They bring **salvation, rescuing, deliverance, graciousness, compassion, healing, and hope.** And all of those good things come straight from the treasure chest of His heart; they are things that He values greatly, and He passionately longs to give them to us. One day, the realization of His goodness, will bring everyone to their knees – the richness of His grace in His kindness far exceeding our expectations – Ephesians 2:7.

But what about His judgments? I mean, God’s judgements are truly scary, right? Doesn’t even the disciple, “whom Jesus loved,” warned most solemnly: *‘And they shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation (KJV)’?*”

Well, I certainly understand the concern. (And as a reminder, it’s the resurrection of **judgment**; not *damnation*.) At issue, then, is how we view His *judgments*. For those who hold the first two views of love’s final victory, His judgments are an end, whereas in the third view, it is a means to an end.

As one of many examples, let’s do a quick review of the following passage in Isaiah, and see how His judgments align well with the third view and are indeed a means to a miraculous ending. Isaiah 66:22-24: *“For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. And it shall come to pass, from new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD. **And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.**”*

1. In Isaiah 51:15-16, we find God using these words, *“that I might establish the heavens and lay the foundation of the earth, when I said to Zion, ‘You are My people.’”* Obviously, He was not talking about the original creation event but rather a transition to an order of divine government established in the heavens and

forming a foundation in the earth within the nation of Israel. This symbolic rhetoric was familiar language to the Hebrews. For example, when Saul died and David took the throne, David said in 2 Samuel 22:8, *“The earth heaved and quaked; the foundations of heaven shook.”* Of course, they did not heave and shake literally, but there was a literal transition of power. I believe this is the key to understand this passage – the new heavens and new earth found in the 66th chapter signifies another new order, brought on this time by Messiah.

2. Chapters 40-66 in the book of Isaiah is an address to Israel concerning the coming Messiah and a change in the administration of God’s Kingdom on earth. God had given the Promised Land, His Kingdom, to one group of people – the Israelites. They were charged with establishing His Kingdom on earth but failed when they could not keep His laws. After Israel’s failure, God announced a much-needed change in Isaiah 65:17: *“Look! I am ready to create a new heaven and new earth! The former ones will no longer be regarded, or even brought to mind.”*
3. With this good news, the age passed where entry into the Kingdom was based upon the impossible task of keeping the Law. Here, God instituted the age of grace, and thankfully, He extended it to all nations – to all people. This is the new heavens and new earth.
4. Jesus’ warnings to those in Israel trying to hold on to the old order, correlate with this passage in Isaiah, and they came with an important component - the timing of the complete destruction of the old order was to occur soon. In Matthew 23:36, Jesus states, *“Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”* Again, in Matthew 24:34 we read, *“I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”* I’ve seen some of the most respected names in Christianity proclaim that Jesus made a mistake when He said these things. Why? Because it didn’t fit their paradigm. So, who do we believe? I’m going with Jesus. How about you?
5. In 70 A.D. God’s wrath fell upon Jerusalem, and the Spirit left the old physical Temple and came to Temples not made with hands. According to various historians, including Flavius Josephus, the horrors and unspeakable events that occurred in and

around Jerusalem from 67-70 AD match perfectly with the language and prophecies found in Isaiah 66 and in Jesus' warnings to the religious leadership of His day.

6. To interpret chapter 66 as pertaining to the future destruction of the universe and a physical replacement with another is foreign to anything the prophet had in mind or that his original audience would have understood. And how troubling would it be if our future home in paradise would be a place where we will continually go out and view the dead bodies of sinners, many of them our loved ones, burning and with worms continually eating their dead flesh. **This unsightly and disturbing scene would bring great sorrow and tears to all but the callused.**
7. Surely those with this literal interpretation do not believe that worms inherit immortality. Aren't God's children better than worms? And how about an actual fire that never burns up the material that's on fire? A literal interpretation is nonsensical.
8. One is on solid exegetical ground when they interpret the 66th chapter as a prophetic word about a coming Messiah as the suffering Savior in 4 B.C. and about His return as a conquering King when He completely destroyed the old order in 70 A.D. and opened the door to His new Kingdom to everyone.
9. The dead bodies of the rebellious Israelites are images of what happens to mankind under the law - the end result is death. However, God having mercy on all, made a new way for everyone to enter His kingdom through the sacrifice of His son, Jesus.
10. Figuratively, we can approach this passage in this way. If **ALL Flesh** goes out and looks on the corpses of them that have "rebelled," whose corpses are they looking at? It would have to include at least some of them, if not all of them. Have you ever rebelled against God? Regrettably, I have, and I look back upon it in abhorrence. The word "basar" is translated "flesh." In the Septuagint "sarc" translates the word "basar," and it is what Paul referred to as **the old nature or self** – as if to say, we are seeing our old rebellious selves from a resurrected state, or at least, a new enlightened perspective, just as Paul did, when looking back at Saul. **This end result is nothing but good news, for it marks a new beginning and a new day for all.**

This is just **one of many** misinterpreted passages by those who cling to the first two views as to what God's final victory will ultimately achieve. For more information on this subject, visit the

web page <https://www.thehellverses.com>. This project was conducted by a team of more than 35 pastors, seminarians, authors, and lay persons. It was created to help eliminate those fears that persist due to confusion about the nature of God's judgments as His means to achieve a good end.

What if God uses the lake of fire to bring those cast into it to repentance? And what if He extends mercy to them afterwards, including those who have done wrong to you and me? Would we be offended? Why, or why not? I think these questions may be helpful in making sure our hearts are right (no matter which view of God's final victory we hold) and that we are not merely seeking vengeance. That's our Father's job: *"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord"* (Romans 12:19.)

Speaking of repayment, look at what justice required for victims of crimes under God's laws as given to Moses – victims were to be repaid by the guilty for their losses. However, as in the case of death, some wrongs could never be made right by the guilty. This is where our Father steps in, for He is the only One who can make all things right and restore what seems to be forever lost. He promises, *"I will repay (your debts)."* And to add icing on the cake, He promises to restore what we have lost by the sins of others. Again, *"I will repay (your losses)."* In the long run, He's got us covered on both ends of the law – what a great Father!

Perhaps, this is why Paul said in Romans 2:16 *"on that day when, according to my gospel (the good news of grace and peace), God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus"* (our near kinsman Redeemer.) Obviously, Paul's story of redemption turned out to be good news for him, just as it will for all others, because he was not judged **by the Law**, but by **His near kinsman Redeemer**, by Christ Jesus – the one who said He came not to judge the world but to save it!

How God Treats His Enemies

Paul was an example, a prototype, of how God treats His enemies and His long-term plans for them. Maybe, this is why His Word tells us to treat them in these ways: *"Love your enemies," "do good to them," "bless them," "pray for them," "feed them," "give them drink," "never bring vengeance," and "do not rejoice when your enemy falls."* Is God a hypocrite? Does He ask us to do something that He has no intentions of doing? No! Our Lord's judgment of His enemy, Saul, was a **signpost** indicating the direction He is going with all of them. Saul's conversion is God's demonstration of how He plans to put ***"all enemies under His feet!"***

Furthermore, God knew that once humanity saw this demonstration of His grace, we would finally understand the type of love He wants us to have for each other – unconditional – the type that we need to enjoy permanent peace and harmony throughout eternity.

Watch how God etches a perfect picture of grace for us in Daniel 9:27 – *And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week; and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that shall be poured upon the desolate.*”

There are **five** Hebrew words which have been translated: "**And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week.**" (As you recall, this "one week" follows the appearance of the Messiah at the end of 69 weeks, and I don't think it's a stretch to assume that "one week," is referring to the last week - the 70th.) The **five** Hebrew words in that passage are: **covenant, confirm, many, one, week.**

"*Covenant,*" "*one,*" and "*week*" are solid translations. I also think the other two are good translations as well. But there are other words that could have been used, and I believe these other words can add more to our understanding.

First, "*confirm*" is good, but other words that could have been used are "**strengthen**" and "**empower.**" The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, used the Greek term where we get our English word for dynamite. This same word is also found in Paul's declaration that the Gospel is the power (dynamite) of God unto salvation, to the Jew first, then the Greek. Who knew Grace was so powerful?

So, how do you strengthen and add power to the covenant? (I'm fairly certain it was the new covenant of grace that was being confirmed, strengthened, and empowered here, because the old covenant of the law was put to death in the middle of that last week, when the sacrifices ceased because of our Lord's death on the Cross.) What kind of strengthening would add power like dynamite?

How about the idea that He strengthened the covenant of **unmerited** favor by selecting a bunch of guys who ran away and denied Him during the Crucifixion? **But there is an even bigger example that illustrates the magnitude and reach of His Grace – choosing someone who is not your friend, but is your enemy, and one who is a Pharisee of Pharisees, a murder-condoning, hubristic person that other followers of Jesus feared. That choice was in a league by itself. That's grace on steroids!**

Selecting a guy like Saul would provide the perfect picture of unmerited favor. Such an act would confirm that the new covenant was about grace, **period. In this way, God "put on display" (Romans 3:25, 26) exactly what grace looks like, for all of us to see. It was dynamite!**

Furthermore, the Hebrew word translated as "many" is in its noun form here. As an adjective, it carries the idea of "*many*." But "sufficient," and "enough" are also solid translations of the adjective. All of those word choices fit the narrative, for He confirmed, or strengthened, the covenant of grace with a sufficient amount - with enough - to carry the word to both Jews and Gentiles. However, the noun form was used here, and this Hebrew noun means "chief." I know the scriptures state the chief apostle was Jesus. But Jesus is not on the list of those who needed to be strengthened at this time. Jesus did not need any confirmation during that entire week; He was the confirmation. Therefore, I submit, Jesus was referring to His small group of followers, and more specifically, He was referring directly to Paul - the chief among His apostles. Paul would be the chief to carry the message of grace to the nations.

"And in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease," marks the middle of that last week when Jesus was nailed to the Cross after His 3 ½ year ministry; He became the sacrifice that would end the need for all future sacrifices. And when I researched when the Damascus Road experience occurred, I found that the consensus opinion among scholars (for no one has conclusive evidence), is that it happened about 3 years after the Cross.

I submit, Paul's conversion happened 3 ½ years after the act which put an end to the sacrifices in midweek – the Cross. **Therefore, the 70 weeks concluded with the calling of "the chief," the perfect example of grace for human consideration. God couldn't have painted a better picture for us to observe, learn, and understand, who He really is, and who we really are!**

Paul's conversion marked the end of the 70 weeks, for God decided He had sufficiently strengthened the visualization of grace for history's consideration; He had selected a former enemy from His own household (Mathew 10:36) as His Commander and Chief for the gospel.

How God Treats His Church

Paul's story demonstrates God's plan for His enemies. **The story of Peter is His plan for the Church. Developing them into a "rock" is another great demonstration of His grace.** Let me explain.

I was always bothered by the statement of Jesus about Peter: "***On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.***" Many say the "rock" is **the revelation given to Peter** found in his prior statement: "*Jesus is the Son of the living God.*" Others disagree. They believe Peter is the rock that the Church was built upon. So, which is it? Maybe it's some of both, or maybe we've missed the main point entirely.

Peter's name in Greek is "Petros" and in Aramaic, it's "Cephas." Both names carry the same meaning: "rock, bed of rocks, cliff, or ledge." Armed with this knowledge, notice the preceding words where Jesus addressed **Peter**: "*I tell **YOU**, that **YOU** are **Peter**.*" Obviously, there was no need to reveal to Peter, or anyone else for that matter, that Peter's name was Peter. So why would He say those words? I believe the answer is found in the meaning behind his name, not in the fact that his name was Peter.

Furthermore, I believe the translation of the Greek word "*epi*," as "*on*" in the phrase "*on this rock*" clouds our view of the point Jesus was making about Peter. "*Epi*" can also be translated as "*on the basis of, or up against.*" So, on the basis of what will God build the Church? Against the backdrop of what? Well, since the overall theme in our Lord's statement to Peter is about building or constructing a home (His Church), I now see Jesus prophetically speaking about how He would build the Church – on the basis of how He formed or built Peter, the rock. Therefore, Peter was not the rock the Church would be built on, but rather the example showing us how God would build His Church.

Let's look at Peter's development. His actions, speech, and decisions for most of his life could not be categorized as rock-solid, except at the very end of it. In general, Peter's life was more fluid-like. For example, in spite of his self-confidence and bravado, Jesus had to correct him several times. Paul had to correct him once as well. On one occasion, Jesus told Peter: "*Get thee behind me, Satan! Thou art an offense to me.*" Ouch! Furthermore, even after Peter was brought to humility, it took an incredible vision before he started to get more in line with the new covenant and in compliance with God's plan for the nations.

However, one can see that even during the times of Peter's weakness, God was transforming him into a rock. And as you watch his development unfold, it becomes obvious how he was just like the rest of us – the Church. At times, we, in our bravado, are totally out of line with the move of the Spirit – not intentionally, but sometimes just plain clueless as to what God is doing. And when we look a little closer at Peter's story, we should see a picture of ourselves.

First, Jesus selected him and gave him the faith to follow Him. Peter did not select Jesus. Then, Peter boldly proclaimed that he knew Jesus, when he really didn't. For example, Peter and the other disciples thought Jesus was going to rise up and kick the tails of the Romans (rulers of this world) and immediately set up a physical kingdom on this earth. They probably thought they'd play a part – get some glory – maybe even get a position in a physical kingdom on this earth.

But in God's plan, His Kingdom *"is not of this world."* God's Kingdom is within; it's within our hearts. That's where Love wants and needs to rule, if we want to experience peace on earth. When God's plan called for something different than Peter and rest of the disciples expected – Jesus to be crucified – Peter denied Him: "I don't know Him," he said three times!

Well, Peter's statements were partly true and partly false. Peter knew Jesus physically, and he lied about that fact, but he really didn't **know** Jesus. And the very worst part of Peter's statement, the truly sad part, were the reasons and motivation behind his denials.

Put yourself in Peter's shoes. **Jesus didn't perform to his expectations**, much to his great disappointment. Have you ever felt let down? Have you ever felt disillusioned and even angry when evil gets the upper hand in the lives of family, friends, and even your own? Has it ever felt like your prayers seemed to fall on deaf ears? Have you ever cried out in the silence from heaven, "Lord, where are you?" Have you ever considered giving up? Many have, just like Peter did.

In his development from a liquid to a solid, Peter was pushed into a corner that he didn't see coming. He came face to face with his own ignorance of God's plan – his own false image of God – and even with his own mortality. And just as we may naturally but mistakenly do in similar circumstances, Peter took matters into his own hands.

After the "fight" survival technique did not work (cutting off the Roman soldier's ear), Peter used the second one – "flight." I'm sure he thought – **the only way to "save" myself from this embarrassment and from certain death, based on the evidence at hand, I must put some distance between me and Jesus – I must deny Him.** If that is you, you are not the only one who ever felt that way.

The belief that Peter could save himself out of his predicament, was in fact, a denial that Jesus was the only One who could save him. However, even in Peter's ignorance and fear, Jesus never gave up on him, and He will never give up on you. Furthermore, I believe this was the precursor to the path the Church would take in its formation and development.

Can you imagine what was going through the head of our Savior? "Come on Peter, really? You think you can save yourself here? Later, you will find that I'm the only One who can and will save you from your ignorance, doubt, fear, and death. That Peter, is how 'the gates of hell (a place of darkness, weeping, gnashing of teeth, and death) shall not **prevail** against you!"

Later, Peter was humbled, and his erroneous beliefs were corrected. Jesus let him know that he was saved by the actions of the Savior alone – by grace alone – unmerited favor. Furthermore, Jesus predicted how He would change this “jello” of a man into a rock.

The last chapter in John’s gospel opens with some weary fishermen coming home from an all-night excursion in failure. They hadn’t caught a thing. In the distance they could make out a stranger on the shore. The stranger told them to cast out their nets **on the right side** of their boat. (I love the symbolism.) Though exhausted, they obliged the request.

The nets which had remained firmly empty suddenly became over-laden with fish. In short order, other disciples came over to help drag the 153 fish to shore. Then, the stranger invited them to breakfast, and very quickly John realized that their host was none other than Jesus. I love the fact that Peter had to put on his clothes, *“for he was stripped (naked) for work.”*

Then began probably the quietest breakfast in recorded history. Every guest at that breakfast knew that when the moment that mattered arrived, they had all fled. And the guy they all had promised not to desert was there in front of them busily serving them breakfast! So, there was nothing to say. We suspect it was impossible for them to make eye contact with Him. This was a foreshadowing of what is to come for those who have denied Him.

Jesus broke the silence by asking Peter a question: *“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest (agapao in the Greek, which speaks of the highest form of love a person can show – sacrificial) thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee with a lesser form of love, phileo, which speaks of the love of a friend.”* Jesus asked Peter the same question again, if he really loved Him—was he willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for Him. But Peter had already proven that he was not willing to make such a sacrifice. The third time, Jesus asked if Peter loved Him with the love of a friend, and Peter sadly admitted that was all he had to give. All attempts at pretense, bravado, and self-delusion were gone, and Peter meekly admits that he can only love [phileo] his Lord as a brother.

This must have crushed Peter. As bad as he felt the night of the betrayal, this judgment may have made him feel worse. But Peter had changed; he had learned some things about himself now.

With a cold, hard look at reality—and perhaps seeing himself for the first time for who he really was and not as he had imagined himself to be—Peter stood his ground. He stood as if naked in the presence of his Maker, and responded (probably with head hung low), *“Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love [phileo] thee.”*

Jesus and Peter understood each other completely. Now that Peter had endured this judgment experience, he was humbled. Having judged His wounded disciple, Jesus next restored him with the following prophetic picture.

If we may be allowed to translate this for you, here is what we think Jesus wanted Peter to understand: “Hey, Peter. When you were young, as you are now, you came and went as you willed. But when you are old, as a result of your steadfast devotion to me, others will control you by force in ways you don’t want.”

In short, Jesus was giving to Peter a snapshot of his future—and the key point boils down to this: “Peter, I am declaring to you that when that next time comes around and once again you are asked whether or not you truly love [agapao] Me, I testify truthfully to you, Peter, that you will pass the test—even to the extent of the laying down of your life for Me. You won’t quit; you won’t run.”

Peter must have smiled as that realization set in. Jesus had predicted his denials and they had come to pass. Now, Jesus was predicting ultimate faithfulness on his part—and so it would also come to pass! Yes, he was going to die for his Lord. So, Peter, the one who was ready to quit and go back to fishing, now turned and followed his Master—to the end.

Afterwards, because Peter needed help in understanding our Lord’s plan for the Gentiles, Jesus gave him a vision of the three heavens – a vision where a sheet full of unclean animals came down from heaven three different times, signifying three groups that God cleanses. God then tells Peter, *“What God has made clean, don't call unclean.”* Question: Will we continue to call participants resurrected in the third group unclean? God’s response: “Don’t go there.”

At that point, maybe Peter understood that Jesus would save all men, but I'm not sure. Whatever the case, I do believe Peter’s development is a snapshot of how the Church is developing.

For the most part, today's Church is just like Peter:

1. They are learning to love Him with the highest form of love.
2. They erroneously think that mankind is partly responsible for salvation.
3. Consequently, they don't know about His plan to save all.

Regarding point number 1, it will be so much easier to reciprocate the kind of love Jesus has for us, once we understand the error identified in point number 2 and the magnificence of His plan found in point number 3.

He alone took full responsibility for salvation, and the problem is, as Peter's denials demonstrate, **any attempt to save ourselves** causes us to put greater distance between us and the One who promises to rescue us from the very things we are running from – **ignorance and death**. **This part of Peter's story is called dramatic irony**, a playwright's technique where an incongruity between the situation and the words used by the main character can only be seen **by the audience**. But there is great news at the very end of this drama, for a great multitude from every nation, tribe, and people is found standing in front of God's throne and the Lamb singing with a loud voice, **"Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb,"** – Revelation 7: 10. The audience (His Church) has just realized this great truth – they could not save themselves, but He alone saved them. **The name, Jesus, means Yahweh (I am) is our salvation**. At that time, point number 1 is learned, number 2 is corrected, and 3 is revealed.

Maybe the story of Peter is the basis of our stories. And maybe the Church will remain partially blind about His plan to save all, until they physically see it when the third group is finally cleansed. At that time, they will learn that this is **"THE JUDGMENT OF GOD,"** and it is good! Grace for one means grace for all, and this love for all is revealed by **His faith and His work** in all. If that's the lesson plan, it sounds like the big reveal will be the most dramatic and best climax in the story of human existence that we could have ever imagined, for it will bring meaning, purpose, and value to every single life.

What About Tori and Ariel?

In the stories of Peter and the other apostles, we observed how God took people, who at some point in their lives seemed to have no value, and how He turned them into persons of great value. I think Paul's story demonstrates it best. But what about Tori Stafford and Ariel Yoder? Have you ever heard of them? Were these two children of less value to God?

Tori was a young nine-year-old Canadian girl who was abducted from her school, raped, tortured, and murdered by two psychopathic adults. On July 21, 2009, police confirmed that remains found two days earlier were those of Tori. Her body was naked from the waist down, wearing only a Hannah Montana T-shirt and a pair of butterfly earrings that she had borrowed from

her mother. Her lower half was significantly decomposed, and during an autopsy, it was determined that she had suffered a beating which caused lacerations to her liver and broken ribs. Her death was the result of repeated blows to the head with a claw hammer after being thrown alive into a large trash bag for execution. Her disappearance and the subsequent investigation were the subject of massive media coverage across Canada, but 100 years from now, the odds are that no one on earth will remember her name, or her story. Question: Didn't God find value in her life?

How about the life of Ariel Yoder? Ariel was six months old when she was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA). She was given a life expectancy of one to two years and passed away at the age of 16 months. Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) occurs when an individual has 2 copies of a mutated gene (1 from the mother and 1 from the father) causing them to develop a disorder that affects motor function. The chance of having this condition is approximately 1 in 10,000 live births, and about 1 of 50 people are carriers who have 1 copy of the mutated gene that could be passed down to their children.

Individuals with SMA don't produce enough survival motor neuron (SMN) protein. This is because they have a mutated or deleted survival motor neuron (SMN1) gene on both of 2 copies of the chromosome where the gene is located. SMN is critical for the survival of motor nerve cells in the spinal cord that send signals from the brain to the muscles. Without it, nerve cells die, muscles deteriorate, and children either never gain, or lose, their ability to sit, stand, walk, and eventually, swallow or breathe. Ariel was one of the "unlucky" ones, one of the 1 in 10,000, who received defective genes from her parents, resulting in her untimely death.

Like so many others, both Tori and Ariel died before having a chance to fulfill their God-given potential. And as a result of these two tragedies, and others in an ocean of tragedies, it is not surprising how so many have lost faith in a God who allows such horrific events to occur every single day. And it is not like the woes of this world are apportioned equally. After the death of their daughter, the Yoders learned that their next son, a boy named Jase had also won the unhappiest of lotteries. And who would want to be President Johnson who was tasked with writing a letter to a mother who had lost four sons during the Vietnam war? The list of sorrows is almost endless.

However, Tori's, Ariel's, and Jase's stories are not yet finished, and neither are the stories of the four brothers who died in Vietnam. One day we will find that they were just as valuable to Him as Peter and Paul. Just because we haven't seen the end from the beginning, as He has, it doesn't

mean that God doesn't have tremendous plans for them and the millions of others who died in similar circumstances.

After they are resurrected and restored with their families and friends, and after having been made complete in our Lord's image and likeness, I'll bet Tori is used by God in the restoration process of the two people who took her life. Tori's name means **the conqueror, the triumphant one, the victor!** And I'll bet millions will be celebrating ecstatically with Ariel, Jase, and the four brothers as God destroys our last common enemy – death. Ariel means **“Lion of God,”** and was the name of the Archangel of **healing and new beginnings!** Jase means **“healer, and the Lord is my salvation.”**

All three of them will be well-known eternally because of God's love for them. They will serve as perfect examples of unmerited favor granted by a Savior who loved them and gave His life for them just as He did for all of His children. Yes, they are extremely valuable to Him, and to all of His family. Just look again at the names God gave them!

We don't know which of the first two harvests the seven mentioned will participate in, but what we do know is that after the third harvest, grace and peace – unconditional love – will always stand in juxtaposition to the old order, where men hurt and killed each other for selfish gain (John 16:1-4), and where random acts of nature threatened us like the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads causing great suffering, pain, and death from all kinds of accidents, injuries, and debilitating diseases like SMA. However, with His training on how to love Him and our neighbors as ourself, He will complete us and lift us up into another dimension, one where entropy, randomness, and luck no longer have roles to play – **“Behold, I make all things new”** (Rev. 21:5.)

Final Thoughts

Before we close, let's review the main points in this article. First, we demonstrated a translation mistake made in 1st Corinthians 15:23, one where “Christ the first-fruits” should have been rendered as “anointed first-fruits.” This is the first squadron, and the evidence for it is overwhelming. Next, we spoke about the second squadron, and finally, we discussed the phrase, “then comes the end.” Since the subject matter and main focus in this section of scriptures was **squadrons of men to be made alive**, we made the argument that “the end” was not about a clock, but referred to the end of the squadrons – the third group to be made alive.

With these corrections, the big news – the wonderful announcement to humanity – that all will be made alive again, with each person falling into one of three squadrons, makes much more sense than telling us the first squadron to be made alive in the future consists of one person, who had already been made alive, and the last squadron is composed of everyone else. To further the confusion, this false narrative ends with a large portion of the last group either burned to death . . . in a lake . . . or tormented with fire . . . in a lake . . . while kept alive forever in a process called the second death? And we label this as a manifestation of “God’s Love?” And then we wonder why otherwise intelligent people reject Christianity after hearing this incongruent message. In contrast, our new understanding aligns well with Israel’s three major feast celebrations and the language used in the books of John and Revelation. **And all of it aligns perfectly with the nature and character of our Heavenly Father and with the manifestation of the Godhead for each of the three groups.**

Hebrews 9:27 tells us all men face death once, **then, comes the judgment.** Knowing the extent of His love for us, **His judgment,** His verdict, as found in Romans 5:18, should not be surprising: **“acquittal and life for all men.” That is His judgment; that is His final decision** as mankind’s near kinsman Redeemer. With this knowledge, 1 Corinthians 1:30 becomes so rich in meaning: *“It is because of Him, **you are in Christ Jesus** (because He was resurrected, so will you be in one of the three harvests) *who has become for us wisdom from God* (denoting His insight, skill, and intelligence to be): our **righteousness** (dikaios – Justifier – the One who can fix us because He has the wisdom), our **holiness** (our purifier) and our **redemption**”* (because He is our near kinsman redeemer.)

No form of human insecurity and selfishness, as in the case of the prodigal son’s elder brother, or in the case of Jonah, is going to change His adjudication. No form of deep-seeded self-righteousness, by those who believe they had a choice in their birth, will stand against His judgment: *“there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we **must** be saved”* (Acts 12:12.) No matter how fervently man-made religions may teach, preach, desire, and appeal for a different outcome, our Lord’s verdict will stand, and the case is closed. **Love wins.**

With three harvests and three corresponding resurrections identified, the eschatology promoted by the Latin Church at Carthage and the school at Ephesus, dies. The beautiful part in our learning process is what arises out of these ashes – the third heaven, where God really does become “all in all.” I pray that capturing a glimpse of this third heaven will transform your hope **and**

turn it into trust, with all the peace and comfort that goes along with it. This is Paul's gospel of **grace and peace**. May our hearts and minds rest in that peace. God's got this!

Jesus: *"For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid down a foundation, and is not able finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'this man began to build, and was not able to finish'"* (Luke 14: 28-29.) The Creator counted the cost, and He knew He could complete what He started – making us in His image and likeness.

On the Cross, the spikes in His hands and feet became the finishing nails. This is why the verbs in Ephesians 2:4-6 are in the past tense when it declares we have been made alive, raised with Him, and made to sit with Him in heavenly places. Jesus proclaimed: **"It is finished"** (John 19:30), **for our benefit** – to feed our faith while we walk through this life. We should do likewise by encouraging others with this view of **The Three Heavens, and the things that can now be told** – the *"good news of great joy, which shall be to all people"* (Luke 2:10-11.)

That good news to all people is further amplified in Mathew 1:17, which summarizes the genealogy of Jesus in this way: *"So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to Christ fourteen generations."* From the promises given to Abraham that in his seed all *families, nations, kindred/lineages* in the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3, 18:18, and Acts 3:25), to the fulfillment of those promises in Jesus, were three groups of people. Each group was numbered the same and equally marked by all manner of sins. The number assigned to each group, fourteen, represents: **Salvation and Rescue** – Deliverance! **This is God's promise to all!**

One student of Bible numerology added this about the number fourteen: "It also references the number seven, which in ancient Jewish numerology is the number for spiritual perfection. As 14 is twice seven, its use implies a double measure of that virtue." To me, it sounds like **God counts all three groups as the same**. It also sounds like **He is promising all three groups the same** with a double emphasis on the end result – perfection! Jesus: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman mixed in **three** measures of flour, till it was all leavened" (Mathew 13:33.)

I'll end with a story from a dear friend and author, Mike Owens. I am telling it as an example of how God teaches us and brings us along over time, and I'm telling it to engender respect for God's timing and the classroom environments He places us in.

In 2014, Mike was studying the possibility of a completely successful Savior, against the backdrop of his upbringing and training in eternal conscious torment. During that year, he attended a conference in Houston where people could listen and interact with “experts on the subject” as they debated all three views about what an ultimate victory for God will achieve. It was called a “Rethinking Hell Conference.” Mike described the atmosphere as very friendly, and overall, the people were appropriately respectful of the diverse opinions represented.

At the end of the conference, questions were posed to the speakers, and one of them went to Edward Fudge, a brilliant lawyer, author, and theologian who had been making a defense of the second view – the ultimate annihilation of the wicked. He was asked to give his thoughts on Romans 5:18-19.

When Edward received the question, he leaned over and began whispering to another panel member, Dr. J. Lanier Burns, a professor from Dallas Theological Seminary, who supported the first view – eternal conscious torment. After a few minutes, Fudge offered a joint reply. He said: “We both wish Paul had not said that.” Then, they both laughed, along with the audience.

That was the entirety of their answer, and it was a turning point for Mike Owens, along with several others. Mike was already leaning toward the third view, but at this point, he became convinced of it.

The third person on the stage was Dr. Thomas Talbott. He was a former professor of philosophy, and he remains a staunch defender of the third view. I have spoken with him a few times, and he has given me a lot of encouragement. I also know that he has debated the best on this topic, like with Mr. Fudge, and I’m sure he has come across some tough questions.

On one occasion, knowing about Talbott’s previous debate experiences, I asked him to give me a quick summary of the strengths of the first two points of view, and I also wanted to know what others might consider to be a weakness in the third view. He paused and looked down; I could tell he was thinking seriously about those questions. After a few moments, he looked up again, smiled, and said: “Jim, I honestly do not know of any strengths in the other two positions, and I honestly do not know of any weaknesses in the third.”

At that point, I told him those were the sentiments of me and my best friend, Mike Meeker, but we wanted to make sure we weren’t missing something. I honestly feel the same as Thomas, but I would be remiss not to say that I haven’t always been sure.

For me, there have been many questions over the years, as well as many hours spent in thought and prayer. So, I will end with my final words of advice to those who are considering this matter. Be totally honest with yourself and with God at all times. If you have questions, take them to your heavenly Father, realizing that He will provide an answer at the absolute perfect time. Having a good friend or two to confide in, ones who will not condemn you or put you down for asking honest questions, or for holding a different opinion, is also very helpful.

All of us are works-in-progress, and we need to be respectful and thankful for the customized training our Father has devised for each one of us. God knows that **belief in Jesus** is the easiest part of our training. All it takes is to hear His voice one time, or a catch a glimpse of Him once. He knows that will happen for everyone at the right time. But God also knows the next part of our training, where we start to actually **believe Jesus (take Him at His Word, what proceeds out of His mouth)**, will take longer. It may take a lifetime of experiences, and/or a lifetime of hearing His voice from the study of His Word, and/or a glimpse of a fully populated third heaven. But it will happen, and it will bring life to all men. I wish you Godspeed in your development.

When you finish your race, the heavenly hosts will rejoice, and guess who will be waiting at the finish line praising and applauding your arrival? *"Therefore, judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every ONE have praise of God"* (I Corinthians 4:5, Rotherham.) The Concordant version renders that last part: *"then applause will be coming to each one from God."*

Imagine that! This is our God and our destiny. No one could pull off something this difficult and complex except Him – bringing into maturity all of His sons and daughters. I love this quote from Joseph Smith Dodge (1834-1921): "The Savior cannot desist from His reconciling work until every soul that God has made shall be, through all its depths, in harmony with Him. The task is vast and difficult beyond conception, and its accomplishment would be plainly impossible if it were committed to any weaker hands than those of the Son of God." Below is a picture when His reality - His finished work - becomes our reality.

As Isaiah 25: 6-9 declares: *"And in this mountain (the gospel) shall the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things; . . . and he will destroy in this mountain (through the gospel) the covering cast over the face of all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his*

people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the Lord hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad, and rejoice in his salvation.”

Unfortunately, orthodox religion has painted an image of a neutered god whose failed plans results in disaster for much of his creation. This is far from accurate. The unintended consequence is that it has confused some and run off others who were hoping for something better. However, catching a vision of His desire to make us like Him, and placing borderless trust in His ability to accomplish that goal, will carry us beyond the most difficult moments of this life. May our Father give us eyes that we may see, ears that we may hear, and feet that we may follow His example.

Questions and Other Considerations

1) How do three resurrections mesh with the belief that the moment a Christians dies, they immediately go to heaven?

The answer depends on one’s perspective. From the perspective of the one who dies, the idea of an immediate resurrection after death fits well within the scope of what we have presented thus far. We will offer proof in what follows. However, for those who remain alive, the idea that those who have preceded us in death are currently living another life in heaven many years without their loved ones, does not fit within the framework of the three resurrections.

From the study of physics, we learn that the measurement of time is something that is not absolute, but it is relative to an observer’s position and movement. For the observer who has died, their awakening to newness of life is instantaneous. However, observers living on the earth will not see the dead again until those who **ARE IN THE TOMB** are raised to life or judgment **after** the thousand-year reign. Attempting to force all observers who are on the earth, under the earth, or above the earth, to measure time exactly the same is an exercise in futility.

For example, if those who have died are currently living in heaven, after the thousand-year reign, will St. Peter need to give an order for everyone in heaven to go back and hop into the graves so that they can be raised from the tombs again? Will those who have been suffering in eternal torment in the lake of fire need to come out temporarily to be judged – so that what – they can be sentenced to hell – again?

The current confusion, created by those who believe that the dead aren’t really dead, has its origins in the serpent’s lie told in the garden: *“You shall not surely die; even though God had said*

previously, *“thou shalt surely die.”* The deceiver proclaimed man’s soul to be immortal, but the terms “immortal soul” or “never-dying soul,” cannot be found anywhere in scripture. What we do find are verses like: *“The **soul** that sinneth, **it shall die**”* (Ezekiel 18:20), and *“for that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them; as the one dieth, so dieth the other (Ecclesiastes 3:19).* We also find scriptures throughout the Bible using these phrases concerning the state of the dead: **They do not know anything, they have no remembrance, they have no knowledge, they have no wisdom, they have no activity, they do not praise the Lord God, and their thoughts perish, because “the wages of sin is death.”**

As God told Hezekiah: *“Set thy house in order: for thou shalt die, **and not live.**”* Why would God add that last phrase? Maybe He anticipated some being deceived and desired to let them know that death is the opposite of life, not another form of living. Furthermore, 1 Timothy 6:16 gives us another strong statement concerning humanity’s present condition as mortal beings with this very clear declaration: *“the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords, who only (alone) hath immortality.”*

Additionally, the confusion continues with the idea that we **have** a soul, when in fact, we **ARE** a soul. Genesis 2:7 – *“And the Lord formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils, the breath (spirit) of life, and **MAN BECAME A LIVING SOUL.**”* The Hebrew word for soul is *“nephesh,”* and the Bible applies the term equally for man and animals in multiple scriptures. Both live and die.

However, man has the hope of resurrection through the work of Jesus, and many great Christians have written about this hope, including Martin Luther. He hotly opposed the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and it showed when he published the following well-known lines:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness:
I dare not trust the serpent’s lie
Regarding immortality.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand
All other ground is sinking sand.”

Later, Edward Mote put those words to music, and they have been sung in churches around the world since 1834 by Christians, most of whom having no clue to the meaning behind the words.

We also learn more about the state of death from Deuteronomy 31:16 – *“And the Lord God said unto Moses, thou shalt sleep with thy fathers.”* The phrase, “sleep with thy fathers,” is used **36**

times in the books of Kings and Chronicles alone. The word, “sleep,” is also used in connection with death in many other books including Job, Psalms, Daniel, Mathew, Mark, Luke, John, Corinthians, and Thessalonians. **Jesus referred to death as “sleep” on multiple occasions,** and as you recall from our opening Corinthians text, **Paul referred to those who died as “those who have fallen asleep.”** **Consequently, the Bible often describes the moment of resurrection as being “awakened” from sleep.**

If death is like sleep, then, from the perspective of the one who dies, which BTW is the most important person in the conversation, **the very next conscious moment for them after death is their resurrection!** To them, no time has passed, just like when you awaken out of sleep, you have no idea how much time has elapsed. **Therefore, death to those who are His in the first two groups is IMMEDIATELY followed by heaven!** In the second, they will awaken and be with all of their loved ones, except for those involved in the third group, who need a little more time. But this also means the dead are not currently looking down on us from heaven; the dead are dead. **They are at rest.**

The laws of motion inform us that an object that does not move is “at rest,” and it will remain “at rest,” until acted upon by an outside force. That outside force is the Spirit of Life which God promises to provide on our resurrection day.

But what about 1 Peter 4:6, where it seems to indicate that Jesus preached the gospel to the dead? A closer look will reveal that the Gospel **WAS** preached to those who **ARE** (already) dead. Those in the past, like Job, David, Isaiah, and Daniel all believed and foretold of a coming resurrection when all men would be judged in righteousness. Also, 1 Peter 3:18-20 does not say Christ went and preached a sermon to dead people. First, “went and” does not appear in the original Greek, but was added later by translators. Secondly, the word translated “preached” means “to proclaim as a herald.” It is not the same as preaching a revival; a different Greek word was used for that type of preaching. Thirdly, the proclamation was to **spirits** in prison, not souls of men. These are probably the same spirits spoken about in Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4-5. Therefore, it was in Christ’s resurrection that he proclaimed, or heralded something, and I’ll bet it was good, to the spirits imprisoned in Tartarus, which were disobedient in the days of Noah.

Regarding Luke 23:43, using the original Greek words and a literal translation, Jesus told the thief on the cross: *“to you I am saying today with me you will be in the paradise.”* The language may sound a bit awkward to us, but the phrase, *“to you I am saying today”* was a Hebrew idiom and used to emphasize a noteworthy day. Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible, the Concordant Literal New

Testament, and the Companion Bible all agree. Rotherham's translates it this way: ***"And he said unto him, Verily I say unto thee this day: With me shalt thou be in paradise."***

Furthermore, the story of the rich man and Lazarus was a parable, Moses and Elijah on the mount was a vision, and the witch did not resurrect Samuel from the dead; Saul only "perceived" it was Samuel, when he was actually communicating with an evil "familiar spirit." And if a witch can resurrect someone from the dead, we've got a whole new problem. Furthermore, Paul did not say "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord," but rather, *"we would rather be away from the body AND at home with the Lord."*

That brings us to "out-of-body experiences." Let me say up front that I believe there are some remarkable experiences preceding death, along with dreams and visions of loved ones in heaven, which I believe were granted by our Heavenly Father as encouragement. However, the data on OBE's and NDE's is inconsistent and does not fit the narrative purported by Christians who say believers go to heaven immediately after death, while non-believers go to hell. **The facts are that most people who lose their vital signs and come back to life, never report anything about an out of body experience**, and the small number who do have one (maybe 5% at best), are people from all religions, as well as atheists and agnostics. They report going to a place of happiness before returning to their physical bodies.

Additionally, experts have linked several medical and mental health conditions to OBEs, including epilepsy, migraine, cardiac arrest, brain injuries, depression, anxiety, and Guillain-Barré syndrome according to Healthline Media. They also report the following: "Dissociative disorders, particularly depersonalization-derealization disorder, can involve frequent feelings or episodes where you seem to be observing yourself from outside your body . . . Sleep paralysis, a temporary state of waking paralysis that occurs during REM sleep and often involves hallucinations, has also been noted as a possible cause of OBEs . . . Some people report having an OBE while under the influence of anesthesia . . . Other substances, including marijuana, ketamine, or hallucinogenic drugs, such as LSD, can also be a factor . . ."

Bottom line, science is not sure why people have these OBE experiences; they have some theories, but they are not sure. However, God knows, and at this point, what Christians know, is that we can place our trust in His Word, and thank Him for His love and the hope He gives us with the promise of immortality – a gift which will be given in one of the three resurrections. **Meantime,**

if God has given you an OBE or NDE, consider yourself blessed, and thank you for letting us know more about what may be in store for us when we are awoken from death to life, instantaneously.

Please note that it was not in the scope of this paper to do an exhaustive analysis on the state of the dead, but to only hit some of the highlights about the hope we have in Jesus. For more on this subject, I would suggest Dr. Bullinger's writings; He was one of Oxford's leading scholars, but there are many other fine works written on the topic as well.

For more encouraging information on the subject of "time," see #12, "The comfort found in 2 Timothy 1:9."

2) What about the unpardonable sin?

Concerning the "unpardonable sin," the KJV of Mathew 12:31-32 states: *"All manner of sin and blaspheme shall be forgiven unto men; but the blaspheme against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the son of man, it shall be forgiven him but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him neither in this world (age), neither in the world (age) to come."*

And here is the KJV of it in Mark 3:28-29: *"Verily I say unto you, all sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith so-ever they shall blaspheme. But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is endanger of eternal damnation."*

Those are very strong words, and it seems the matter is clearly stated – blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is an unpardonable sin – period – end of story! However, others believe that all sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven through faith in the atoning work of Jesus.

So, which is it? Let's begin our discussion with the setting behind this story in Mathew and Mark. Jesus had just healed a man who had been deaf and blind, and during this time in the middle east, those physical conditions were often attributed to demon-possession. But no matter if the man was possessed or not, everyone should have been celebrating the miracle of someone being able to see and hear again!

If we had been there, some of us would have done our best Austin Powers impersonation with a big "Yeah Baby!" followed by a big Tiger Woods fist-pumping "Yes!" But not the Scribes and Pharisees in attendance. No, instead, they accused Jesus of casting out the devil by the prince of devils. It is hard to imagine how a group of people could turn such a great miracle into something so hateful. These so-called experts in holiness were so out-of-sync with God that they couldn't distinguish good from evil, even when it was staring them in the face. Jesus crushed them on this

point, and with a little historical context, we can see how well He did by turning their own beliefs against themselves.

The great William Barclay, in his commentary on Mathew, informs us that according to the teaching of the Jews, the Holy Spirit had two supreme functions. First, it brought truth to men and women, and secondly, it helped them recognize and understand it when they saw it. In other words, it helped them to distinguish between right and wrong – good and evil. And this is what Jesus used against them. In verse 35 He said: *“A good man out of the treasures of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart, evil things.”* This is also why He told them: *“Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by its fruit.”*

Basically, Jesus told them two things: What I did was good, and what you said was evil. The fact you can't recognize the difference between good and evil means the Holy Spirit does not reside in you. Ouch! That cut to their core. Personally, I'll bet some of them recognized the difference but were in a state of denial. But had Jesus told them they were in denial, they probably would have responded with: “No, we're in Israel, and we've never even been to Egypt.”

Jesus also gave them three common-sense answers as to why if He did cast out a demon, it was only because He was on the opposite side of Satan. With each point made, Jesus put them down so low, that from that point forward, they would need to roll down their socks to use the restroom. Barclay and others believe this marked a turning point for the Scribes and Pharisees. At this point, they began a plot to kill Him.

Here is another important observation by William Barclay. Keeping in mind Jesus was speaking directly to the Scribes and Pharisees, Barclay informs us: “When Rabbis began a parable, they often began it: ‘There was a son of man who. . .’ when we would simply say: ‘There was a man.’” Barclay goes on to explain how this phrase was also used in the Old Testament to refer to a man. Here's one of those cases where God addresses Ezekiel: *“And he said to me: ‘Son of man, stand on your feet. . .’* In all of the cases cited, the phrase, son of man, simply meant “man,” and that's how these Jews would have understood it. They would not have understood the phrase to be referring to the Messiah.

Therefore, Barclay believed Jesus was merely stating that the Pharisees may show contempt for another man and be forgiven, with repentance of course, just like any other manner of sin. Although the word “repentance” is not mentioned, it was understood by His audience.

Next, the KJV states they will be no forgiveness “in this world, neither in the world to come.” However, “world” has been corrected in most translations and changed to “age.” The Greek word for “world” is “kosmos,” but that word was not used. “Aion,” was used, and it’s a word where we get our English word for eon or age.

Let me say up front that I have been blessed by the KJV, and I plan to use it for the rest of my life. I appreciate the hard work done by those commissioned to bring us our first English Bible. However, I also realize they were humans, therefore, not perfect, just like the rest of us! And when I looked a little closer at some of their translation here, I think they may have gone a little over-board in their genuine efforts to warn us about this very egregious and awful sin. Now, back to Mathew.

Obviously, Jesus knew what was in the hearts of these Scribes and Pharisees. He also knew what was in store for them in the future. He knew they would not repent in the age they were living in, under the Covenant of the Law, and He knew they would not repent in the next age after the crucifixion, under the Covenant of Grace. Jesus knew these Pharisees would see both ages before they passed from this life, and He knew that without repentance, there could be no forgiveness of sin. We can only imagine the sternness in our Lord’s voice when He uttered those piercing words about forgiveness as He stared directly into their eyes.

Therefore, Barclay and others see our Lord’s statements about forgiveness to be directed at these religious leaders as a prophetic warning concerning their future. The fact is, they didn’t repent, and neither did Israel as a nation. They slandered the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus to the point where they had Him killed, and afterward, they slandered and even murdered some who were filled with the Holy Spirit and commissioned to take the Good News to the rest of the world. Consequently, for their lack of repentance, Israel suffered total destruction in 70 A.D. at the hands of the Romans.

If you are not convinced by Barclay’s arguments, and you still believe our Lord’s warning about blaspheme applied to all men, and you believe that those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, then, what do you do with 1 Timothy 1:13? In it, Paul stated very clearly that he had been guilty of blaspheme, yet, he said he was forgiven.

Did Saul blaspheme against the work of the Holy Spirit? Yes, and you can’t get any more slanderous, irreverent, or insulting than to speak against, threaten, arrest, convict, and participate in the murder of ones who had been filled with the Spirit and were being led by it. Yet, Paul was

forgiven after he repented during his three-day trip to Damascus. After that experience, Paul emphatically professed that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ – Romans 8:38-39.

Furthermore, in Timothy, Paul proclaimed he received mercy so that God could put on display His patience, “so that I might be the first outline sketch” of others who would follow. What? Others in God's household (His children) may follow Saul's path of blaspheme and all manner of unrepentant sin followed by a time spent in darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth, followed by repentance and forgiveness? Does the path include death to self and the resurrection of a new creature in which Christ permanently resides? Is that the outline?

However, there are still some issues that need to be addressed in this Mark passage concerning the “unpardonable sin,” before we can decide whether or not there really is such a thing. First, the word translated as “never” in the phrase, “hath never forgiveness,” in Mark 3:29 is actually the Greek word for “no, or not.” So, I think “never” may be a little strong, and Paul's forgiveness proves it, at least in my mind. Secondly, the word translated as “eternal” (aionios) is the adjective form of that mistranslated noun we found in Mathew – aion. And thirdly, as we previously discussed, the word translated as “damnation,” should have been translated as “judgment.”

With these insights about **never, eternal, and damnation**, some see Jesus' warning about the sin of blaspheme to be one where the guilty will face certain judgment for an unknown period of time, a time unknown to anyone but God, for who knows better than Him how to bring His children to genuine repentance.

What is also interesting about the *phrase “blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness”* is what Dr. Daniel Wallace says about the construction of it. The verb is in the present tense, indicative mood, and active voice. The tense and mood place the emphasis on the subject, not on time. They are not predictors of the future, but rather are indicators of the present condition. It is very similar to the aorist tense, which is just a "snapshot" of an event.

This makes historical sense, since the ones Jesus was speaking to at the time - Scribes, Pharisees, and Israel in general as a nation, were the subject. Since they would not repent, they would not receive forgiveness at that present time.

Later, Saul, who was a Pharisee, would repent and be forgiven of his blasphemy against the work of the Holy Spirit. But again, Jesus knew the people He was speaking to at that time would not repent, therefore, they would not be forgiven.

Paul blasphemed out of ignorance, and his judgment for it and many other sins, came in the form of blindness for a period of three days. Bottom line, the danger of damnation for blaspheme, if you wanted to go that route, was not eternal, and the idea of “never” being forgiven, turned out not to be true either.

Therefore, many liken Jesus’ words in Mark to a parent giving a stern warning to their children: “If you do ____ (fill in the blank), you will be put in time out, and under no circumstances will I let you off the hook! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?” (Of course, in the neighborhood where I grew up, our parents promised to use the belt; “time outs” were for sports.)

Because we love our children so much, sometimes we need to be loud and stern in an attempt to keep them from harming themselves and/or others. In those instances, yelling the words, “I’ll never forgive you!” would be totally out of place.

As we stated before, without repentance, Jesus knew that Israel would enter a long period of darkness after their nation was destroyed at the hands of the Romans in 70 A.D. But we also know from the scriptures that God is not finished with them. One day, *“all of Israel shall be saved, as it is written, ‘There shall come out of Zion a Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is my covenant with them, when I shall take away their sins’”* (Romans 11:26,27.)

3) What about Mark 9:43-46 – better to cut off body parts and enter into life maimed, than going to hell?

“And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” King James Version.

To obtain the best understanding of any scripture, we need to understand the context in which it was written. Here, Jesus holds a private meeting with His disciples to correct some of their misguided thoughts. In it, He asked them, “What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?” In embarrassment, they didn’t answer, but Jesus knew exactly what they had been arguing about - who would be greatest in the kingdom. He answered the question, but it was not in line with what they were thinking. He told them the greatest would be the last and the servant of all; it would be the person who welcomed and received the least among them.

Jesus taught this with such gentleness and kindness, even using a child to drive home His point. He would finish the lesson when He instructed them not to forbid those who were doing the

work of the kingdom, those who they had just looked down upon, because they were not in their clique. I think the disciples got the message.

The teaching method our Lord used here allows us the privilege of listening to this private conversation, as if we were actually there, looking over the shoulders of these men of Israel, – Israel, the focal point of our Lord’s ministry. And this is one of the most important points in this answer, for when reading the gospels, we must remember who Jesus came to minister to first – Israel.

Sometimes, the things Jesus said were meant strictly for Israel, and they can only be applied to them in their circumstances. For example, He gave the covenant of the law to them, and no other nation. When He speaks concerning it, it was meant specifically for Israel alone, not for us. However, that’s not to say we can’t learn from Israel’s experiences.

Once we obtain a good understanding of what Jesus was trying to convey to Israel, then, we can also better understand what He might be saying to those looking over their shoulders – us. Jesus knew we would be listening, so He included some lessons and admonition for us as well. This occurs in other spots in the gospels, and if we can discern when He is speaking to them, and what He is speaking to all of us, the scriptures will be viewed with much greater clarity.

Here, in this Mark passage, watch how this approach will turn some seemingly outrageous statements into rationale thought. Watch how this lesson becomes a very practical warning to Israel concerning their immediate future. It was not meant to encourage an apotemnophilia disorder, nor was it meant to be some far-out-into-the-future warning to the rest of the world designed to scare men everywhere, like something akin to the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads. No, this warning was real, immediate, and its horrible effects were about to come quickly upon Israel. Let’s read on and see how this unfolds.

Mark 9: 45-48: *"And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than to having two feet to be cast into hell . . . And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than to having two eyes to be cast into hell fire, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."*

As we continue to read this section of Mark, we find Jesus continuing to make more startling statements. They insinuate that if you are maimed before entering God’s kingdom, you will remain in the same condition after entering. Yikes! He also speaks about immortal worms, something I could have used for better results during my last fishing trip. And He spoke about the

holy grail in physics – a source of perpetual energy! (These last statements are not meant to take lightly what Jesus was saying to Israel. His message was serious and a stern warning to them, but my point is worth restating – it was not meant for us, as we will soon see.)

In this lesson, three body parts were used – hands, feet, and eyes. Notice there are two of each, and Jesus tells these Israelites to cut off, pluck out, or remove the one that offends. Most modern Bibles translate “offend thee” as “causes them to sin.” Both of these phrases come from one Hebrew word, and neither phrase really conveys what we need to know. The Hebrew term for “causes,” as well as the Hebrew for “sin,” are not found here; this is just a case where translators are doing their best to make (force) this passage to apply to everyone.

The Greek word used here is “skandalizo.” It’s derived from “skandalon,” which was the name for a part of a trap or a snare to which bait is attached. Figuratively, it was a source of displeasure, a stumbling block, or an occasion to fall. So, according to Strong’s concordance, skandalizo means to put a stumbling block or impediment in the way, upon which another may trip and fall.

With our new set of lenses, our first question should be: “What was the snare or trap causing Israel discomfort? What was this stumbling block which would cause them to fall? Before we answer these questions, please notice that Jesus didn’t say to remove both hands, feet, and eyes, only the one that was causing them to stumble. Which hand was holding the bait in a trap that might cause them discomfort? Which foot was ensnared in that trap? Which eye was looking at this stumbling block as something to be desired?

It sounds like these Israelites must have been facing a choice between two opposing ideas. One would be desired, but it would also entrap them, cause them to stumble, and cause them to fall. The other, which may have seemed less desirable at the time, would keep them from becoming entrapped, keep them from falling, and keep them standing upright. Whatever choice they had to make would either allow them to live, or would spell their doom.

The worms and the fire Jesus spoke about were in reference to Jerusalem’s garbage dump, the valley of Gehenna, where the worms feasted on the refuse and the fire burnt the trash continually, until one way or the other, all of it was consumed. That dump no longer exists, those worms are now gone, and the fire no longer burns there. I believe these Israelite boys understood these references, because they lived there, but we have a more difficult time understanding, because we didn’t, and it wasn’t meant for us.

I believe this lesson was about two covenants and the choice Israel was facing at this point in their history. At that time, Israel was under the covenant of the law, which brought the knowledge of sin (Rom. 7:7-8) and the power of sin (1 Cor. 15:56.) The law produced wrath (Rom. 4:15). It was the law that was causing Israel to stumble, because they couldn't keep it. For that reason, that covenant was faulty (Heb. 8:7), and there was a need to replace it with something better (Gal. 2:16.)

Jesus knew that no flesh would be justified by the law (Rom. 3:20), and He came to replace it with a new covenant of grace. He was bringing an end to the old order (Rom. 10:4), and offering them a way out of their entanglement. The Jews should have understood this, especially after what happened at Beth Shemesh. There, 50,070 men lost their lives after they removed the mercy seat and looked inside the Ark where the law was stored. Obviously, when there is nothing standing between us and the law, death is the result. We need the mercy seat – Jesus – to cover the law on our behalf.

However, with few exceptions, the Jews would hold on to the law and reject God's grace at this time. This would cause them to fall, bringing about the total destruction of their temple and death to their nation in 70 A.D. They would be consumed like the trash in the garbage dump of Gehenna. This is an historical fact, and this was what Jesus was warning them about. If they stayed under the law, they would be judged by it. With Israel, the Lord drew us a picture of what happens when we reject His grace.

This theme is summed up in Romans by the words of Paul. Starting in chapter 9 with verse 31: *"but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on the law did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall (skandalon); and he who believes in Him will not be put to shame.' Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified."*

Because Israel erroneously believed it was in their ability to keep the law, they held on to the old covenant and suffered the curses of it. Consequently, God would bury them temporarily in

“hades,” the grave, the land of the unseen. (Our translators used an old English word, “hell,” which literally meant “to put in the ground.”)

It would be a hard lesson for Israel to learn, and it would become difficult even for the Gentiles to accept later. For Israel, giving up the old covenant would be like cutting off a limb, or plucking out an eye. Surely, they would be maimed without it. For the Gentiles, just as it was with Israel, accepting grace is terribly difficult on our egos, for our tendency is to rely on ourselves, rather than on the righteousness of God.

For us, who were never under that law covenant, when we see Israel’s reaction, we are looking at a reflection of who we are. The lesson for all of us is that self-righteousness and self-reliance will not get anyone to the promised land. This was the same decision Adam and Eve faced in the garden. They had to choose between eating of the tree of life – the covenant of grace – or the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – the covenant of the law. Choosing the latter ended in death for Adam, Eve, and Israel.

Fortunately, that is not the end of the story. Jesus once relayed a parable about a treasure buried in a field. Israel was His treasure, and even though He buried them as a nation in 70 A.D., He still planned to resurrect them at some point in the future. The field (the world) is His and all that’s in it. He paid for it, including the treasure He buried in that field.

Later, we are told, there is coming a day *“when all Israel shall be saved”* (Rom. 11:26.) In order to accomplish that task, God’s plan called for another type of worm – Jesus – to give His life, so that life could be given to Israel once again. His plan also called for another type of fire, the fire of His presence, which will purge Israel and make them complete in His image and likeness.

The even better news is that He plans to bring everyone to this understanding, whether Jew or Gentile. Isaiah 45:22-24 says that every knee will bow in humility, and everyone will swear this oath – “my righteousness and strength are in you.” Hints of this promise are contained within our text, where Jesus tells us *“all will be salted with fire.”* He adds, *“salt is good.”* Yes, His plan – His generosity – is good; as a matter of fact, it’s good beyond our imagination!

“For every one will be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its flavor, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with each other” (Mark 9:49-50.)

In the second chapter of Leviticus, we find instructions concerning the cereal offering – the offering of grain. In it, oil (God’s anointing) was to be poured over the grain, but no honey or leaven

was to be added. However, salt was to be poured out on the grain. Then, to drive home the point, the mixture was burnt on an altar of fire. This SALTING, WITH FIRE, would make “a sweet savor (odor) unto the Lord.” Why was honey or leaven not to be used?

Regarding the honey, nothing needed to be added to this sacrifice to make it any sweeter than it would already be to our God – no self-righteousness, no self-reliance, no work done by us, needs to be added to His work on the Cross.

Regarding leaven, He once warned to “beware the leaven of the Pharisees.” Some say leaven was a symbolic of sin. That may be true, but why did Jesus single out the leaven of the Pharisees; He could have used the sin of anyone. To make a long story short, it turns out this leaven was what the Pharisee’s taught – entrance into God’s Kingdom would be based on a man’s ability to fulfill the Law – man’s own righteousness (the mindset of Nicodemus and as reflected in the mindset of Israel.)

Independence and self-reliance are good things. As leaven makes bread rise, these traits also make a woman or a man rise to the top in everyday life. However, they won’t be enough for our salvation. Our efforts, our righteousness, will fall short, just as with the example our Father left for all of history to see – Israel. But the good news – He will gladly give all of us His righteousness on our behalf.

Back to our Mark passage, and in closing, Jesus leaves us with the idea that it is a good thing when His fire purges us of our self-righteousness, our belief that we are better than others. In this, we will be a better servant to all, giving us the ability to live in peace and harmony with our brothers and sisters. This is the part that was meant for all of us, not just for these Israelites.

Let’s not go back to where Israel once stood with the old law covenant; let’s move forward with our feet planted on the path of His grace, with our eyes focusing on that grace, and with our hands holding on to His grace. This is the only Way we can live in peace with Him and each other in His kingdom.

Last thoughts: Remember what happened on the mount of transfiguration? Peter wanted to build three tabernacles – one for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Then, God interrupted and told them to **listen to my Son!** Peter, James and John immediately fell to the ground face down in fear, until Jesus touched them and told them not to be fearful. When they arose, the Law and the Prophets were gone. **No one was left but Jesus,** the One who saves us by His grace!

4) What about those who have fallen away?

Hebrews 6:4-6 tells us: "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."

George Sarris answers: "The word impossible here has a force similar to what Jesus said to His disciples after He told them it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. In response to their question, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." The writer of Hebrews is saying it's impossible for people to bring back someone who has fallen away and thus subjected Jesus to public disgrace. But it's not impossible for God to restore that individual."

George goes on to explain how Peter fell into the category of someone once enlightened but who had fallen away. However, he was later restored.

5) What about Mathew 25:46?

"And these shall go away to punishment age-during, but the righteous to life age-during" from Young's Literal Translation, or *"And these shall be coming away into chastening eonian, yet the just into life eonian"* from the Concordant Literal Version. Note: The King James Version incorrectly translated a portion of it with the phrases "everlasting punishment" and "life eternal."

What follows are just a few comments about this passage from my friend's web page: **TheHellVerses.com**. His name is Mike Owens, and on his web page, he summarizes the comments of 35 other pastors, seminarians, authors, and lay persons concerning this verse and others. They are rich with knowledge and insight, and I would highly recommend reading all of the eye-opening articles contained within it. Concerning this verse, Mike summarizes with:

- The word punishment comes from the Greek word "kolasis" which is better translated "chastisement" since "kolasis" was not a word used for retribution but for discipline that was in the interest of setting things right. "Kolasis" was used for the pruning of trees in order to help them grow better.
- Matthew 25:46 is recorded as the close of a long day in Jesus' recorded ministry. The conversation began after Jesus left the temple where He railed at the religious

leadership. In Matthew 23 we find some of the harshest language Jesus employed. This language was NOT aimed at the average citizen. Nor was it aimed at the heathen nations surrounding Israel. It was, in fact, aimed at the Jewish leadership, the Pharisees, scribes, and lawyers.

- Within this portion of Matthew's writings Jesus is making a very startling and irritating point: the religious and Jewish political leadership of His day was utterly corrupt. Judgment was at the door.
- Among Jesus' descriptive words for the Jewish leadership of His generation was "blind guides, hypocrites, den of snakes, sons of Gehenna (the local city dump translated Hell by some translations), white-washed tombs and fools. After a thorough thrashing Jesus declared to them, *"I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon THIS generation."* (not some generation 1,000 or 2,000 years later.) (Matthew 23:34-36)
- A careful reading of Josephus' "War of the Jews" reveals EVERYTHING Jesus foretold in these verses were perfectly fulfilled within that very generation of Jews. Matthew 25:46 is a part of this warning to the Jews, not a warning to anyone after 70 AD."
- Thayer describes "to go away" or "going off" with regards to Strong's, G565 ἀπέρχομαι, equivalent to "going away from" or "departing evils" unlike the common understanding of being thrown into a pit of fire.
- This verse closes Matthew's explanation of the separation of the goats and sheep. If we are to assume any one individual meets the qualifications of a sheep and another a goat, this becomes problematic considering most of us meet the requirements for both. A close look into these qualifications will reveal that most everyone we know qualifies as a sheep and a goat - simultaneously.
- Nowhere in Matthew's text are we told anything about believers or unbelievers.

- Matthew’s use of rhetoric is frequent, and we see it here. **Endless punishment in fire is no more literal than the fact that nations nor individuals are sheep or goats.**
- Many sense their certainty of everlasting life from the second half of this verse and John 3:16. However, believers should not find their assurance of “eternal” life from the term “eternal” - especially in light of the fact that this term has been inaccurately translated here. Our assurance of endlessness in Glory comes from our inclusion or adoption into the lineage of the one who is everlasting, the Last Adam, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:16-19 and 1 Corinthians 15:22) An accomplishment brought on by His faithfulness, not ours.

6) What about 2 Thessalonians 1:9?

“Who, indeed, a penalty, shall pay—age-abiding destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might” Rotherham Version. *“Who shall suffer justice—destruction age-during—from the face of the Lord, and from the glory of his strength”* Young's Literal Translation. Note: The KJV incorrectly describes the destruction as “everlasting,” and the NASB and the NIV make it worse by calling it: “the eternal destruction **away** from the presence of the Lord,” and “everlasting destruction **and shut out** from the presence of the Lord.” These last two translations are so poor that I don’t know why I am wasting the ink with them, except to show the lengths some translators have gone to support their bias; it’s not even close to being correct.

Besides the same problems with “everlasting” and “eternal” as we previously discussed at length, Dr. Thomas Talbott points out that the Greek phrase correctly translated by Rotherham and Young as “from the presence of the Lord,” is the same in another passage, Acts 3:19: *“Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”* Using the NASB and NIV translation consistently, as they used it here in Thessalonians, we would need to translate Acts 3:19 as follows: “so that refreshing times might come and shut you out or exclude you from the presence of the Lord.” Dr. Talbott’s final comment: “That in essence is what some translators have done to II Thessalonians 1:9. It is just that bad.”

I probably need to be a little more understanding of others who translate this Thessalonians verse so poorly, because Talbott goes on to explain that the Greek “apo”, like the English “from”, can sometimes mean “away from”—as when, for example, the kings of the earth and others cry out on the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from (apo) the

face of the one seated on the throne and from (apo) the wrath of the Lamb.” . . . When we try to hide or to conceal ourselves from the presence of the Lord (an impossible task) we are indeed trying to get away from that presence. But in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 there is no verb, such as “to hide” or “to conceal”, and no other grammatical device that would give grammatical sense to such a rendering. Indeed, just as the presence of the Lord brings refreshment to the obedient, it brings destruction upon the disobedient – Thank you Thomas.

Without this knowledge, the casual reader of the NASB or NIV might read this with the idea that those receiving this judgment are removed eternally away from the presence of the Lord. However, correction that comes “*from the presence of the Lord*” does the exact opposite. What did the presence of the Lord do to Saul on the way to Damascus? The wicked are not destroyed permanently; they are changed. That’s what the presence of the Lord does.

7) What about Mathew 13:50?

“And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” King James Version. *“And they shall be casting them into a furnace of fire. There shall be lamentation and gnashing of teeth”* Concordant Literal Version.

We’ve discussed the purpose of God’s fire, so we won’t spend a great deal of time reviewing that topic. What I’d like to get across here are a few points about perspective – and how it affects how we interpret what Jesus may be saying, and to whom He is saying it to. Mike Owens addressed this verse as well on his web page, and here are a few comments that he published which will give us a better perspective concerning this passage:

- This is a portion of a series of Jesus’ parables directed to His disciples. As other verses we’ve looked at, this passage may have at least two connotations as a warning to those who will see the great destruction in 67-70 AD and symbolism regarding the pain and sorrow surrounding sinfulness in this world. We should be cautious in assuming this is a promise for punishment in the afterlife especially in light of the fact that Jesus declares that He did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world in John 3:17.
- Jesus’ warnings were almost always to the Jewish leadership of “this generation” and described events that occurred before the end of the current age in 70 AD. So, is

this verse illustrating the same thing as the parable of the tares Jesus had just discussed in verse 40?" In that parable, Jesus used the same Greek word for what is gathered aside: *poneros*, "the worthless person/thing or the disadvantageous circumstance," in each case, and both are burned (vs. 40 and vs. 50), and then in both situations "the weeping (crying and lamentation) and the grinding of teeth" will be in that situation (or: place)" (vs. 42 and vs. 50).

- In both cases, the Romans would be the agents that would bring the fire to Jerusalem. In both "places" or "situations," the weeping and grinding of teeth would refer to those who survived the fires of loss and destruction – they were still alive, not dead.
- The phrase, the end of the age, tells us a great deal about who these evil doers were. The end of the age refers to the end of the law covenant and the beginning of the age of grace. The Jewish nation, who was hanging onto the old covenant, were the ones to be removed making the way for the age of grace.
- Paul tells us the same story in the eleventh chapter of Romans. He informs us that God uses Israel's falling away to bring in the rest of the nations, and then promises a day "*when all Israel shall be saved*" as well. Paul's profound statement occurs within this explanation: "*God has consigned all to disobedience, so that He can display His mercy for all.*"
- And all of this is in line with two more parables told after the one about the tares and leading up to our Mathew text. In those two parables, Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a hidden treasure in a field and a merchant finding a pearl of great value. Israel is that treasure and pearl of great price. This is also reflected of how Jesus feels about all of His children.
- In the next parable, our Mathew text, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a net, which was thrown into the sea and brought back to land. It was full of fish. Then, the men sorted through the fish and put the good ones into vessels, and threw away the bad ones. The net was the message of grace, and it was thrown over and into the sea. This signified that it would cover all people of the earth. The good fish

were the ones who on board with God's new covenant of grace, vessels of honor, and the bad fish were the Jews who stood in the way of this good news. They had to be temporarily discarded as vessels of dishonor. They added no value during the implementation of the age of grace; they actively resisted it. However, they too will be resurrected and shown God's mercy! The one thing the scriptures affirm that God delights to show us: His mercy.

- It's likely the disciples did not understand any of this, although they said they did when Jesus asked them. However, the understanding would come later as events foretold by Jesus unfolded in that generation. This would have given them great confidence to endure to the end.

8) But what about Mathew 7:13-14?

"Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" Revised Standard Version.

In those days it was quite normal to enter a city on a broad road which led through a wide gate. However, narrow side paths were also available with entry leading through smaller gates. A. E. Knoch pointed out that these paths were seldom used. The small gates were closed during the day and locked at night. It was easier to take the broad road.

If this were the case, why would anyone use the narrow path? It would not be natural to do so, and I believe this gives us the big "Blues Clue" on how to view our Lord's teaching.

Jesus was teaching his disciples and warning them in this text of Israel's negative position and approaching doom as a nation for their failure to believe in Him as their Messiah. "Many" in Israel believed their ability to fulfill the law would bring them salvation as individual's and as a nation. However, Israel's history had revealed the weakness of the flesh and the impossibility of reaching that goal through obedience to the law. The covenant of grace would be God's answer, and "few" in Israel would accept the new way.

Given man's nature, it was quite natural for Israel to take the broad road – believe that they could achieve salvation through their own efforts by following the law. It would take a lesson in humility (the narrow path) to admit failure. In 70 A.D. the destruction of the "many"

occurred just as Jesus had foretold in the Olivet Discourse (Mathew 24:34.) This is an historical fact.

However, Jesus did not acquiesce to this outcome as the end of the matter. He would now take the way of the cross as a ransom for “many” (Mathew 20:28.) This is the same “many” who entered the wide gate on the road of self-reliance, self-righteousness and ultimately, destruction. Jan Bonda: “Jesus goes the way of the cross in order to open for these many the way of escape from eternal punishment, to make sure that their ‘going away to eternal punishment’ is followed by their return. For that reason, He became obedient until death on the cross. Therefore, every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall at last confess: Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:8-11).”

9) But what about the parable concerning Lazarus and Dives?

“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived in luxury every day. At his gate laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The tie came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell (hades), where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus at his side. 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.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that during your lifetime you your good things, and Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so they don’t also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, Father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” Luke 16:19-31 (NIV)

There is so much to be said about this parable, and I think it best to leave you with how Mike Owens summarized it on his previously mentioned web page.

- These two men, Lazarus and the rich man, are two classes of people and they represent how the self-righteous (Pharisees) viewed themselves and their disregard for the rest of the world. (These Pharisees claimed exclusive access to God and His blessings. It is in this atmosphere of exclusion and distinction and judgmental attitudes that Jesus tells this story.)
- But Abraham replied, Son (Abraham addresses the rich man as “Son”, again likely indicating that the “rich man” is a descendant of Abraham) you remember that in your lifetime you received your good things – the law, the prophets, and the covenant. The rich man is undoubtedly symbolic of the Jews/Pharisees.
- Jews in that day commonly referred to Gentiles as dogs. In Matthew 15:26, for example, Jesus at first refuses to help a Gentile woman because “it isn’t right to throw the children’s (Jew’s) bread to the dogs (Gentiles)”. The woman responds that “even the dogs eat the leftovers from their master’s table.”
- Some believe the salient point of the parable was about greed. That it is to warn the greedy about their need for repentance and kindness in this life.
- Many agree that it is the final parable in a chain of five parables given by Jesus which begins at Luke 15:3. The four parables that immediately precede this parable are: A) The lost and found sheep B) The lost and found coin C) The lost and found “prodigal” son D) The shrewd manager. Each of these parables address the subject of something or someone that is lost. The primary avowal of ownership and value is in the ability to be “lost.” No one can be reckoned as lost unless they are owned. Worth is declared when something or someone is deemed to be lost and sought after.
- Many agree that the first four stories are parables, with doubt that the final one is also a parable - yet two of them begin exactly as the fifth with this introduction by Jesus, “There was. . .”
- Martin Luther taught that the story was a parable about rich and poor in this life and the details of the afterlife not to be taken literally: Therefore, we conclude that the

bosom of Abraham signifies nothing else than the Word of God. (Church Postil 1522–23)

- These parables were addressed directly to the tax collectors and common “sinners” while the Pharisees were muttering comments and listening in.
- Jesus turns His instruction toward the Pharisees because they interrupted Him between parable #4 and parable #5. Their disrespect was followed by a sharp and thorough rebuke. After scolding them for being lovers of money, He said their arrogance was an abomination. He then uncovered their violence, for they were the ones who killed the prophets, and in a short time, they would crucify Him. He reminded them that Israel had committed adultery in the past and were now divorced. And anyone who married them would also commit adultery. It is likely they knew exactly what He was talking about.
- In the fourth story, Jesus speaks of an unrighteous manager. Sadly, even in judgment, the Pharisees would not be as shrewd as that manager. When learning that he was about to lose his position, he sought to do favors for others who were also in debt. By taking that action, he thought the other debtors might give him a place to live out his days without becoming a beggar. However, instead of at least making an attempt to get along with the Romans, Israel rebels against them, and in 70 A.D., they would lose the possibility for an aionion (age-lasting) habitation under Roman rule.
- This parable is the fifth and final one presented during this event. Some see its placement as #5 to be significant as grace is symbolized by the number five. The number five has many interesting correlating similarities to the placement here.
- As we will see in the upcoming points to consider, this allegory is revealing something profound about the old covenant - the law - coupled with man’s efforts and the contrast with the new covenant - grace - based on our weakness and His mercy.

- The Pharisees seem to be represented by the rich man in the fifth parable. In verses 14 we read, The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. We also find that they were people who “exalted themselves before men.”
- Other facts about the rich man include, he had five brothers, feasted sumptuously, and was dressed in purple and fine linen. All of these details pointed to these Jews, the Pharisees. Judah had five brothers from his mother, Leah. They were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, and Zebulun.
- Purple is symbolic of royalty, and it was the citizens of the southern Kingdom of Judah that returned from the Babylonian area to rebuild Jerusalem. They became known as “Jews,” which technically speaking, is short for “the people of Judah.” The Pharisees knew their heritage well, and they surely knew Jesus was speaking about them when referring to the rich man.
- The name Lazarus is Greek for Eliezer or Eleazar. It is likely that this is Abraham’s number one assistant. According to most interpretations, the unnamed “...slave, the elder of the household, who controlled all that was his” in Genesis 24. The man who found Rebekah for Isaac was this Eliezer. Eliezer, or Lazarus, of Damascus was Abraham’s Syrian Gentile servant set to inherit Abraham’s house if Abraham has no heir. (Genesis 15:2)
- It is likely that Lazarus is a figure of either the “outcasts” (or: sinners) of Israel, as the Pharisees considered them – since they were considered to be unclean, and he was covered with sores and attended by dogs (figure of the Samaritans or pagans, in the eyes of the Pharisees) – or he is a figure of the non-Jews.
- It is reasonable the first two parables seemed harmless, and the Pharisees probably did not understand that Jesus was speaking about them - as the elder brother in the third story. But when He told the story about the unrighteous manager, that’s when they knew He was singling them out, and that is likely the reason they interrupted with their scoffing.
- Many agree that the poor man was an image of the tax collectors and sinners who were looked down on by the elite Pharisees. Because the Pharisees considered

riches to be a sign of God's blessings, it was quite natural for them to consider the poor as less important than themselves.

- The story has nothing to say about belief in Jesus as the Christ, or even about faith in God. The story does not say the rich man was bad or evil, or that Lazarus was good or righteous.
- After identifying the symbols of a story like this it's important to remember that a parable is a short allegorical story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, principle, or lesson. It is not to be taken literally.
- With regards to the denial by Abraham to allow the rich man to tell others, Richard Bauckham writes, "The means of revelation which the reader expects it to acquire as the story proceeds are denied it. The story in effect deprives itself of any claim to offer an apocalyptic glimpse of the secrets of the world beyond the grave. It cannot claim eyewitness authority as a literal description of the fate of the dead. It only has the status of a parable. It is part of a story told to make a point. The point is no more than the law and the prophets say – and that no more than the law and the prophets is required."
- Alfred Edersheim notes, "Is this teaching a simple reversal of situations in the next life? Does it mean that only the destitute and miserable get saved and the rich go to hell? Of course not! So let's consider these two figures. We see in vs. 24 that the rich man said, "Father Abraham." Likewise, we saw that Abraham acknowledges him as his "child" in vs. 25. This identifies him as a Jew, and this is the figure he plays in this parable. The rich man is a figure of the Jews (specifically, the Pharisees)."
- NT Wright summarizes, "The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is to be treated precisely as a parable, not as a literal description of the afterlife and its possibilities. It is therefore inappropriate to use it as prima facie evidence for Jesus' own sketching of a standard post-mortem scenario."
- It is safe to say that this allegory is not about who is going to "heaven" or "hell." Nor is it about "eternal" destinies. If this was the case, then we'd have to redefine hades

and the supposed qualifications for heaven or hell: those who are poor go to heaven and those who are rich and greedy go to hell.

- To assume “Abraham’s bosom” is heaven is pure conjecture with no biblical or cultural support. While Abraham was used in a very unique and powerful way, he is a mere man born of Adam like us all.
- Abraham doesn’t have the authority or power to grant resurrection or even temporal revival. Nowhere in scripture are we instructed that God has given any man this ability. It's not Abraham’s call.
- If “heaven” was a place where we could see “the lost” in a place of torment, then that would be a sad and miserable place. In fact, the concept of “hell” displaces any genuine joy in “heaven.” This would mean that our God is unable or unwilling to deliver any or most of His creation. Believing our Creator/Sustainer/God is neither able or willing to redeem His creatures whom He sovereignly placed within their environment and created their propensities is repugnant.
- David once said in his later years that in all of his days, he had never seen the righteous forsaken, nor even his seed begging for bread (Psalms 37:25.) Why would Jesus use a man sick and full of sores begging at the gate as a representative of His followers?
- Abraham’s bosom: Abraham received many great promises. In his seed all families, all peoples and all nations would be blessed. Kings would also come from his loins and the King of Kings, the Messiah would come from his loins - and these promises were kept in Abraham’s bosom. Also, included in Abraham’s bosom, was knowledge learned by experience, that these promises were not the result of human effort as seen in Abraham and Sarah’s effort to fulfill their desire for a child by using Hagar and not waiting.
- Paul tells us in Galatians 4:21-31 important details about the allegorical aspects of Sarah and Hagar and the covenant of the law and the covenant of grace. This parable seems to be a herald of the eminent close of the old arrangement of the law.

- This series of five parables begins at Luke 15:1 with the Pharisees murmuring because Jesus was having fellowship and communion with “sinners” - a similar attitude is displayed with the older brother in the third parable and this same spirit with those who detest the idea that everyone will be redeemed.
- Paul, in Romans 7:6 and Galatians 2:19, makes two amazing statements that provides the breakthrough we need to understand the symbolic nature of the death of the poor man: “But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.” and "For through the law I died to the law, that I might live to God.”
- The death of the poor man in the parable had nothing to do with physical death. It was the Jews death to the old covenant that Jesus was speaking about. As a result of accepting grace, they were carried by the Spirit into Abraham’s bosom.
- The rich man’s demise was a representation of what those who desired to stay under the law would experience. Dead in misery under the weight of an agreement they could not keep. They would be in anguish. Again, this has nothing to do with physical death.
- It was likely quite obvious to the Jews that this parable was painting a picture and telling them that the gateway to the kingdom is by God’s mercy, not human righteousness or efforts which they were quite proud of.
- The Great Gulf Fixed: This seems to be making it clear that the two covenants, law and grace, are polar opposites. They cannot be mixed. The law was conditional. Grace is entirely unconditional, otherwise it is not grace. Yet, many in Christianity today try to present grace as something that is conditional, even if it’s merely “acceptance” that triggers God's mercy - sometimes referred to as decisional regeneration.
- It’s interesting that these five parables are together making it known to those who are open and listening that something is about to change. The age of grace is

profound and different than what they knew, but the first three parables express beyond any doubt - none will be left out or forgotten.

- The story of Jacob and Esau is another allegory about the two covenants. When Jacob lost the struggle, all he could do was hold on and ask for blessings. At that moment, he realized he never needed to struggle to make the promises happen; all he had to do was trust God for them; God would do the work. He entered the next phase of his life lame, being carried on God's shoulders to Abraham's bosom, and his name was changed to Israel, which means "God rules." Since their story was another allegory, then, "Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated" becomes: "the covenant of grace have I loved, and the covenant of the law have I hated for your sakes, because one leads to abundant life, while the other leads to death." And this has everything to do with the fifth parable.
- For us, who were never under that law covenant, we have no idea of the difficulty facing the Jews, and we should not condemn them. Our advantage is that it is easier for us to focus on the new covenant of grace, and for that, we should be very thankful.
- Jim Strahan offers this observation: How would you feel if you were under a contract that you could not keep? Wouldn't you be miserable? This is the place where Israel found itself, and Jesus came to get them out of that contract. In this parable, it is plain to see that mankind cannot get to grace, traverse the great gulf to be in grace, with human effort; they must be carried by the Spirit.
- The terms torment and fire or heat mentioned in verses 23 and 24 are interesting. Torment is a term used in metallurgy. In Greek it is *basanidzo* which referred to the testing of metals with the touchstone, and figuratively meant to be tested or to experience a hard time.
- Abraham represents the place of God's acceptance, care and comfort – and Paul looks to him as a figure of God's chosen who would produce the Promise (figured in Isaac), the Messiah, who would inaugurate the new covenant, from which the old arrangement (represented by the scribes and Pharisees) was to be excluded.

- Here is another excellent observation by Alfred Edersheim: But in the fire of God's dealings, the once rich man becomes aware of his need of the water of life, and realizes that the outcasts have it. He asks for mercy. But his condition and his time of judgment has placed a gulf between himself and those now being graced with God's favor (a gulf that only Christ can span). Still, we can see another change happening in him: he begins to think of others. He wants Lazarus to evangelize his brothers so that they will not have the same separation.
- Maybe Israel should have caught the hint when God had them place the law in a casket. Strong's concordance informs us that the Hebrew word for Ark is a coffin. 2 Corinthians 3:6 And He has qualified us as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Paul makes it clear that the law ends in death. Grace brings us life. This parable is a prophecy to the demise of the Pharisees attempt to arrogantly declare their righteousness through their status as rich. It's important for us to remember that wealth in their culture meant righteousness and worthy of blessings while being poor and sickly meant that someone was sinful or cursed by God.
- Peter Hiatt adds this: Judah the rich man, wasn't thirsty for the Messiah and thought he could pay for all his drinks. Hades makes a person thirsty for Grace and Jesus promises that he will give to the thirsty. He destroys the chasm *"Every valley shall be exalted and the mountain and hills laid low."* - - Further noting: *"To the thirsty I will give from the spring of water of life without payment."* (Rev. 21:6, also 22:17)
- In the last verse, Abraham tells the rich man (the self-righteous Pharisees) if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. Jesus could possibly be referring to: 1) The "rich man", 2) Lazarus (the brother of Mary and Martha) or 3) Himself, the Messiah. Either way, their hearts have proven to be stubborn and seeing someone experience resurrection would not convince them. [It's interesting to remember the eight days of stubbornness declared by the disciple Thomas after the resurrection of Jesus, yet

he believed once he saw the risen Christ. Like Thomas, everyone who has ever lived will see the risen Christ and greeted with love and understanding just like Thomas.]

- In the second parable, the lost coin is found, and the owner loses none. Mike Meeker noted there were ten coins. Could it be these represent the ten lost tribes of Israel who were taken into captivity by the Assyrians and scattered among the nations? Their lostness is only temporary, for the owner seeks them until he has them all in his possession. Deuteronomy 4:25-31
- Paul tells us the same story in the eleventh chapter of Romans with a different twist. He adds more by informing us that this was God's magnificent plan all along - to use Israel's falling away to bring salvation to the rest of the world. Paul makes it clear: *"Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles (nations), how much more will their full inclusion mean?"* He then foretold a day *"when all Israel shall be saved."* Afterwards, Paul reminds us that the gifts and callings of God are *"irrevocable."* This is in keeping with a love that never gives up and never fails. (1 Corinthians 13)
- Here's what we might learn from these five parables. You can go your own way and our Savior will not give up until all the lost sheep are found, all the lost coins are found, and all of the lost family members return home safely. If one is looking for a summary of how the story ends for mankind; right upfront Jesus ties it altogether with a three-stranded cord that is a major part of this often-misunderstood parable and all are directed at the Pharisees.
- This is the only place where "hades" (the grave; the realm of the dead – vs. 23) is associated with fire, and it is within what many view as a parable. A study of the figure of fire, as used in Scripture, will show that it signifies God - which brings purification – but that's a study all of its own. Mal. 3:1-6; 1 Cor. 3:9-17
- The rich man in the grave (recall that he was buried – vs. 22) speaks of the death of the place and position of the Jewish leadership of that time, and of their exclusion from participation in the activities of God's reign, which Jesus initiated. This story runs parallel to the metaphor of the olive tree in Rom. 11:16-24, where Paul had

been speaking of Israel, and their "casting away" in vs. 15. It also compares to the allegory in Gal. 4. The rich man was a figure for the old covenant that could not be included in the blessings of Abraham.

- There is no other place in the New Testament where Christ gives such an extensive narrative of anything, in the past tense, that is not a parable.
- "The Parable itself is strictly of the Pharisees and their relation to the 'publicans and sinners' whom they despised, and to whose stewardship they opposed thoughts of their own proprietorship. With infinite wisdom and depth, the Parable tells in two directions: In regard to their selfish use of the literal riches – their covetousness – and in regard to their selfish use of the figurative riches: their Pharisaic righteousness, which left poor Lazarus at their door to the dogs and to famine, not bestowing on him aught from their supposed rich festive banquets." (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Vol. II, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953, p 277)
- John Lightfoot (1602–1675) considered the parable as a parody of the Pharisee belief concerning the Bosom of Abraham, and from the connection of Abraham saying the rich man's family would not believe even if the parable Lazarus was raised, to the priests' failure to believe in the resurrection of Christ: Any one may see, how Christ points at the infidelity of the Jews, even after that himself shall have risen again.
- E. W. Bullinger in the Companion Bible cited Lightfoot's comment, and expanded it to include their lack of belief in the resurrection of the historical Lazarus (John 12:10).
- The idea of penal torment falls apart with this parable. The "penalty" is that a person cannot "pay." People in stress, pain and confusion are convinced that they must pay... they have not come to the end of themselves. When we come to the end of ourselves, we're thirsty - and it's grace that stares us in the face.
- An additional view popularized by Johann Sepp in France in the 19th century identifies the Sadducees as the target. It's noted the wearing of purple and fine

linen, priestly dress, and the reference to "five brothers in my father's house" as an allusion to Caiaphas' father-in-law Annas, and his five sons who also served as high priests based on the historical writings of Josephus. This idea is strengthened by Abraham's statement in the parable that they would not believe even if he raised Lazarus, and then the fulfillment that when Jesus did raise Lazarus of Bethany the Sadducees not only did not believe, but attempted to have Lazarus killed again: "So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well" (John 12:10).

- Peter Hiatt once more mentions this: Abraham has a fascinating knowledge of "consuming fire." In Genesis 18, Abraham has an extended conversation with a God-man, begging Him not to destroy Sodom with eternal fire. Yet Ezekiel reveals God will "restore Sodom." He annihilates her and re-creates her with eternal fire. Abraham now seems to be at peace with this fire.
- The bottom line: With Israel's failure, God sent His Son to the rescue offering them a better covenant. However, the Jewish leadership wanted to hang on to the old. This is the backdrop to the parable about the poor man and the rich man.
- This comment by Gary Amirault and Tentmaker.org is fitting for this study: It is a highly appropriate message to Christians today, who claim exclusive access to God's covenant and blessings, and see themselves as the mediators of these blessings to other people. The message is this: you are to love all people, and not exclude anyone or set yourselves up as better than they are. Do not keep people of other beliefs (or lack of beliefs) at "arm's length", afraid of getting their "impurities" on you. It is God who purifies you. Your position is to love and serve all, not to sit around the table together while the rest of the world sits outside at the gate.

10) What about Judas Iscariot?

A.E. Knoch compiled a book from a weekly periodical called "Unsearchable Riches." In it he addressed this question and many other issues. He entitled this packaged set of essays as "The Problem of Evil and the Judgments of God." I am inserting the text from pages 184 through 188 which demonstrates that the English translation, once again, fails to deliver to the English mind the meaning the Greek language delivers. Here is what Knoch wrote:

“whom Thou hast given Me in Thy name, and I guard them, and not one of them perished except the son of destruction, that the Scripture may be fulfilled.” (John 17:12)

Here is the secret of our Lord's apparent callousness. His every act was conformed to God's written revelation. God had spoken. Not even pity could move Him to do anything to hinder the divine decree. That is why He rather hastened it. That is why He deliberately chose an adversary, and made no effort whatever to save him from his fate. But was our Lord really callous? Did He enjoy having such a character among those near and dear to Him? Acquiescing in God's foreordination, He seldom spoke of it, for no one else knew about it and, of necessity, it could not be made known before the event. It was not at all ideal to have a man like Judas about. Christ suffered much from contact with outsiders, hard hearted scribes, hypocritical Pharisees, faithless Sadducees. Among His own close companions and constant attendants, the only possible ideal would be unswerving loyalty, unstinted devotion.

We earnestly beg the reader to consider the facts we have presented and test them by the Scriptures. Many may be tempted to cry, "Blasphemy!" Many may insist that God could not do these things, no matter how clearly the Scriptures seem to certify to them. But these matters are so set forth that they cannot be misunderstood. The fact that they are shunned shows that it is not a question of understanding but of believing. These facts are in our Bible and will stay there whether we accept them or not. They should help us to see that there are depths in God which we have not fathomed. They should show us that there is something radically wrong with our theology when we cannot bear these, 'hard sayings.' or do not exult in these "dark passages". Only once does our Lord bare His heart in relation to Judas, and that just at the crisis when Satan enters into him, and he goes away to give up his Lord. Here again Christ falls back upon the fact that the Scriptures must be fulfilled. "The Son of Mankind is indeed going away according as it is written concerning Him, yet woe to that man through whom the Son of Mankind is being given up! Ideal were it for Him if that man were not to do born!" (Mark 14:21, Mat. 26: 24). Here He was, with the twelve, just before His sufferings, and He wished to pour out His heart to them. Alone with them in the upper room, the conditions seemed ideal. But His sensitive spirit knew that they were not ideal. One of the twelve hindered these sacred revelations. That one must be removed before He can speak freely. So, Judas is told to go. Then

His heart is relieved. Fondly calling the eleven "little children" for the first time, He utters the wonderful words as we have them in the fourteenth to the seventeenth chapters of John's evangel.

In all four of the accounts of our Lord's life, the constant first mention of Judas Iscariot is accompanied by the statement that he is the betrayer. He was chosen with the rest of the twelve. We know the compassion of our Lord. How the very sight of Judas must have disturbed Him! Eleven true, trusting hearts. Why not unmask this one false intruder and remove him from his office? It was written! Evil, such as this, must be borne, or the Scriptures cannot be fulfilled. But the conditions certainly were not ideal. A potential traitor is no apostle. Christ, no doubt, rejoiced in the honors He would confer on His faithful band, in the kingdom. But He must also have shuddered at the prospect awaiting one of them. How much it would have saved Him if that man had not been born! If Matthias, who was also with them, had been in his place from the first, His heart would not have been burdened by the state and fate of Judas Iscariot.

The usual translation, "Good were it for that man if he had never been born," has no foundation in the Original. In examining various translations, we must always bear in mind that the tendency to translate in accord with accepted theology is so overwhelmingly strong that a very little evidence on the other side is practical proof of the correctness of any unpopular translation. This is an excellent example. It is well known that the Revised Version margin is more dependable than the text, especially where the reading of the Greek is given. All will recognize how impossible it would be to get a two-thirds vote of the Revision Committee in favor of conforming this text to the Original. Few men who would do such a thing would be chosen for such a task. Yet there were a few who were faithful, and these succeeded in putting the truth into the margin: "Good were it for him, if that man had not been born."

In such passages as these we can realize the benefits of an exact concordant version. What was good for the Son of Mankind, and what was ideal, are two distinct ideas. I have no doubt that, at bottom, it was good for Him to have Judas, if we understand by, good "that which will work out the most blessing in the end. The sphere of the word, good, is very wide and its force here is difficult to define. But the Greek word kalos, "ideal", limits the thought to that which reaches our highest conception of perfection at the time. Twelve faithful apostles would

be the ideal for Christ, though one traitor was doubtless among the all things that worked together for good. So, we may even be justified in saying that the birth of Judas was good, but not ideal, for the Son of Mankind.

Whatever may be our estimate of Rotherham's Emphasized Version, we may be quite sure that, at first, he made little attempt to pander to public opinion. The character of his translation makes his testimony of special weight in a matter of this kind. He was not concerned about the language so much as the sense. He renders it, "well would it have been for him, if that man had not been born."

Two translations used by Roman Catholics have this text correctly turned. The Douay version of Matthew 26:24 reads: "it were better for him, if that man had not been born." Dr. Leander van Ess, in his German version, renders it "for him were it better, such a human were never born."

LUTHER'S VERSION

Luther's version, by itself, is proof that the Concordant Version rendering is right. Though the Greek is precisely the same in Matthew and Mark, he renders it correctly in the former and twists it in the latter. May we ask, if it really read, good were it for Judas if he never had been born, would Luther, or any other translator, make it read, good were it for the Lord, if Judas had not been born Never! But Luther reads (literally): "it were better for him that the same human never were born". In Mark 14: 21 he renders the same words:" it were better for the same human that he never were born".

In the context immediately preceding, the identity of those referred to is fixed beyond question. It may be set forth as follows:

<i>Him</i>	<i>that man</i>
<i>(The Son of Mankind)</i>	<i>(Judas)</i>
<i>The Son of Mankind is indeed</i>	<i>Yet woe to that man through,</i>
<i>going away according as it is</i>	<i>whom the Son of Mankind is</i>
<i>written concerning Him.</i>	<i>being betrayed!</i>

Ideal were it for Him if that man were not born! If it had read "Ideal were it for that man if he had not been born (as usually mistranslated) then both would refer to Judas. But no unprejudiced reader of the English or the Greek can possibly refer the Him to anyone but our Lord, Who is so termed in the preceding sentence.

But if all the translations ever made rendered the passage incorrectly, that would not prove anything except human fallibility-which is already proven. The Original speaks of the Son of Mankind as Him and of Judas as that man, and makes it clear that it were ideal for Him if that man were not born. The real cause of this mistranslation is the hardness of the human heart. On the one hand, who has been concerned with the feelings of our Lord and His distress at having the traitor in His company? Even His saints seem utterly unable to sympathize with Him in this trial. On the other hand, they have allowed a just indignation at Judas' dreadful deed to degenerate into vindictiveness, and attribute to our Lord the harshness of their own hearts. In judging Judas they have condemned themselves.

The Scriptures show the utter helplessness of Judas. How could he flee from his fate? Not only were the powers of evil against him, but the powers of good were just as determined to make him play his part. God Himself had determined the role he should have, and Christ, the only Saviour, must act in accord with the divine decree, I beg my readers not to evade the issue. Let them put themselves in Judas' place. What can a mortal do when Satan and Christ and God all force him to commit a deed so awful in his own eyes that it drives him to desperation and death?

It may help if I confess that I once feared to face this issue. I tried to find a way for God to get out of this dilemma. The idea that He could make vessels for dishonor (Rom. 9: 21), and then punish them eternally was incredible. And I was right. God could not do such a thing. My mistake was to disbelieve God's plain statement and all the evidence which sustains it in the Scriptures, because I had accepted a false theology in regard to His future dealings with these vessels which He fits for destruction. Since I now know that God will not only deal justly with them, but lovingly, I am able to believe God, glorify God, and exult in the God Who remains Love, even when He hardens and hates.

My friend Mike Meeker adds:

So now we can see that when the correct translation of the Greek is known, there is no reason to assume that Judas will be permanently separated from Him who loves all mankind. In fact, having clarified the real meaning of this verse, we now believe that Judas' eternal destiny will be that he will be permanently restored to God—for Jesus atoned for the sins of all mankind—including Judas. If Judas' role in the crucifixion of Christ can be forgiven, then what are we to think about the destinies of the Jewish leadership and the Roman authorities who actually carried out the crucifixion?

The Apostle Paul perhaps said it best when he wrote: "We do, however speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory."

As amazing as it seems, Paul has absolved both of these authorities of any complicity in the death of Jesus. In fact, Paul asserts that if the authorities—the rulers of this age—had actually and fully understood who Jesus Christ was—the only begotten Son of God—they never would have crucified Him! It was their job to ensure that God's plan for the redemption of mankind would take place just as He planned. They carried out the wish of the crowd as they shouted angrily: "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!" This crowd is in illustration what mankind is in reality—rebellious. Yet God chose to restore all mankind to Himself even while we were His enemies.

If a person destined to "betray" Christ is to be forgiven and if those who actually carried out the crucifixion were acting on the behest of an unseen sovereign are to be restored to God one day, then why should we assume that anyone is to be left out of God's ultimate plan for restoration back to God?

This brings us back to that word "betray." We hope we have made the case that our emphasis as Christians should be in glorying in God's amazing ability and willingness to redeem all mankind instead of venting anger against those who "betrayed" and crucified our Lord. We had mentioned earlier that the use of the word 'betray' is based on the Greek word paradidomi. We mentioned that this word is used in other passages where it becomes obvious that the word will not sustain the idea of "betrayal" as it is normally understood.

Our first example is documented in the book of Luke where the conversation between Jesus and Satan takes place after Jesus had been fasting in the wilderness. During the exchange, Satan

asks the Lord to worship him in exchange for Satan giving his authority over all the kingdoms of this world to Jesus. Then he makes an astonishing admission: all the splendor and authority of these kingdoms were given (paradidomi) to him! We immediately ask, “who gave Satan authority over all the kingdoms of this world”? There is no doubt in our minds as to who Satan is referring to: God himself gave him the authority over the kingdoms of this world. Quite rightly, he could give up control over these kingdoms if he so chose to—but only at a price, the price of worship. Of course, Jesus emphatically said no to this request by quoting Scripture.

We ask the reader to now insert the word “betrayed” in place of “given” in verse six. No Christian is going to be comfortable with the idea the God “betrayed” mankind over to Satan by giving him authority over all the kingdoms of this world. Because we can believe in God’s sovereignty, we can see that God would have been willing to temporarily cede authority over to Satan, but our belief in His ultimate goodness prohibits us from believing that He has betrayed us.

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul describes sins degrading effect on mankind. It is so corrosive of maintaining a proper relationship with God, that the inspired Apostle records three times in this chapter this statement: “God gave them over ...” to various spiritual afflictions. Would you care to guess what word Paul used in these passages? That’s right; he used the word we have been examining: paradidiomi. The Christian is not likely to countenance the idea that God “betrayed” mankind—even the evil members of it. It somehow seems not to fit the image of God that He would betray and perhaps even abandon mankind or a portion thereof.

So, it would seem the best solution to this situation is to translate the word as “hand over” for that nuance works for all these situations. Coupled with the fact that Judas was chosen long before he was born to play the role in this drama that he did, we should be able to rest in God’s grace and His wisdom.

Thank you, Mike.

11) What about eternal life?

In her book, ***Raising Hell***, Julie Ferwerda gives a great summary of the mistranslated phrase, “eternal life.” I love how she begins the answer to our question on page 113. She starts with John 3:16, and below is what she wrote.

*Understood properly, this verse is talking about having the abundant life of Christ **now**, beginning in this age, not exclusively later. Here is a more literal translation:*

For thus God loves the world, so that He gives His only-begotten Son, that everyone who is believing in Him should not be perishing, but may be having age-abiding life (CLT).

Notice the present progressive tense of the Greek. This is significant because there are plenty of places where the Greek uses past or future tenses, but the present progressive tense was used intentionally to convey specific meaning about the onset and continuation of life in the ages. As we will thoroughly explore later, this verse declares an often-repeated theme of the NT – at any point in time that you put your faith in Christ, you immediately begin to experience “eonian (aionion) life,” or life beginning in the current age and continuing throughout the coming ages. And for anyone who has not put their faith in Christ, they are in the process of “perishing” – right now, in this age (John 15:1-11). Think of it like a green plant thriving by a water source, or withering away for a lack of water.

As promised, Julie continued to “thoroughly explore” this idea on pages 153-155.

When I offer the more literal translation, “These will go away into eonian correction, but the just into eonian life,” people question how this passage could possibly mean anything less or different than what they have always been taught – that Jesus is speaking of “eternal life,” and therefore He must also be referring to “eternal punishment.”

*Here is what they are missing; “eonian life” is not eternal life. It means coming into life (relationship with Jesus) in the age the Bible writer is referring to and continuing through the remaining ages. In any age that you live that you are connected to Jesus – the life source or “Vine” – you are enjoying life in that age. For instance, as a believer in Christ, I am currently enjoying life pertaining to this age. When the next age arrives, perhaps the seventh age of the “Wedding Feast” or “Sabbath Rest,” I will no longer be enjoying life in this age, but then it will be life pertaining to that age. Eonian life, then, is not so much about the time that begins after we die, but more about a quality and vitality of life **right now**, lived in fellowship God through His Son. Consider the following, paying close attention to the Greek Scripture writer’s specific use of the present progressive verbs:*

John 3:15-16 “everyone believing in Him should not be perishing but may have eonian life” (MLT).

John 5:24: "Verily, verily, I say to you that the one hearing my word and believing the One who sent me is having eonian life and is not coming into judging but has stepped out of death into life" (MLT).

*John 6:47: "I am saying to you, **the one believing in me is having eonian life**" (MLT).*

*John 17:3: "This is eonian life – **that they may be knowing you**, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you commissioned" (MLT). You can't get any clearer on a definition of eonian life than that!*

Romans 6:22-23: "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you are having...the outcome, eonian life. For the wages of sin is death, but the grace gift of God is eonian life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (MLT).

Galatians 6:8-10: "For the one sowing in his flesh will be reaping corruption out of the flesh. Yet the one sowing in the Spirit, out of the Spirit shall be reaping eonian life" (MLT).

1 John 3:14: We have perceived that we have stepped out of death and into life because we are loving the brothers. The one not loving the brother is remaining in death" (MLT).

1 John 5:11-12: "This is the testimony, that gives us eonian life. And this life is His Son. The one having the Son is having life; the one not having the Son of God is not having life" (MLT).

There are many more such verses you can look up, correcting them with eonian life and the proper verb tense to experience the greater truth that Jesus came to give us life right now – not just later – and that people's lives are markedly improved when they believe, understand, and live the true Gospel message.

Thank you, Julie, for that outstanding answer!

12) The comfort found in 2 Timothy 1:9

Who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus pro chronon aionion. . .

"Pro chronon aionion" is an odd combination of words. The King James Version and the Living Bible translate it as "before the world began," the New International Version as "before the beginning of time," and the Revised Standard as "ages ago." These are close, and they do get across the idea that our salvation and calling in Christ were made possible before we came

into existence, or at the very least, a long time (ages) ago. But the Holy Spirit knows exactly how to say “before the world (kosmos) began, or before the ages (aions) began, or before time (chronon) began. However, Paul was not inspired to use any of those exact phrases. Maybe there is more here than just a declaration about timing in the words he did use. Let’s take a closer look.

Aionion is the adjective here that describes chronon, or time. Chronos makes me think about a certain order, or timing of events – the idea of one event following another – in chronological order. As we stated earlier, aionios is the adjective form of the noun aion, where we get the English word eon, or age. The Hebrew equivalent of aion is olam, and each mean an unknown period of time.

In the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, we find some words that a few birds sang about in my youth (here’s where you laugh) indicating a time and purpose for everything under heaven. After naming these wonderful, and some not so wonderful periods in our lives, the passage then tells us what we already know from experience - that God has hidden the timing of these events, so that no man knows the beginning to the end. I don’t think this was a Howard Cosell moment, who was a sports announcer and master of stating the obvious, and I do think there is an important point being made here by our loving Father. That is: Although these periods of time are unknown to us, by contrast, they are known to Him, for each has been designed and arranged by Him with a purpose in mind. Therefore, we can take great comfort in that – He knows.

My mother recently passed away from the awful disease of Alzheimer’s. Her last days were very difficult, and she suffered greatly. My sisters and I kept asking why He would not end it sooner for her. But we took great comfort knowing there was a purpose, and it ultimately ended with her salvation and calling to a place of rest. As we experience both the good and the bad in this life, we can know from pro chronon aionios, that He is the one who gives meaning and purpose, placing these unknown periods in a chronological order, all for the purpose of our calling and our ultimate salvation.

At the time Paul wrote these words in his second letter to Timothy, the Jews were still having great difficulty passing from the age of the law to the age of grace. That challenge is hard for us to imagine some 2000 years later.

Think about it - Israel had lost everything because they could not keep the law, and the leaders of the day were trying to get the people to follow it again. They thought logically, if they were to follow the law again, they and their children would obtain salvation from the Romans, and they could fulfill their calling as God's people. Looking back, we know they missed the object lesson from their history. Neither goal could be achieved by their own works, their own efforts. But now, Jesus had paved the way for them with a new age of grace.

Change is hard for us humans, and this one was a major one! The Jews saw keeping the old law covenant as a matter of life and death – for their nation – AND FOR THE LIFE AND SUCCESS OF THEIR CHILDREN!

When I look at their predicament, and their reaction, I see me. If it were not for God's mercy toward me in revealing the richness of His kindness – His grace – I probably would have resisted the change too. I cannot condemn; I can only be thankful for his mercy upon me.

I also understand that Paul was writing one of his last letters to Timothy, and he wanted it to be an encouragement to believers who were facing tremendous persecution, up to and including death. Reminding them through these words that God was in control of whatever circumstances they were to face, invigorated the faith they needed to endure.

In summary, we can be confident that when difficult ages and stages in our lives come, even though these times are unknown to us, they are known to Him, for He is sovereign over the ages. The words, *olam*, *aion*, *aionios*, and *chronon*, are words of comfort, not just words merely used to emphasize the length of something. Relax! He is the *aionion* God, the God who controls the ages, our Father.

I also believe there is even more comfort to be found in Revelation 10:6, where it tells us there will be no more "*chronos*." Most translate this word as "delay," and I can see some merit in that use of that word, but I also believe that God is providing even more for our consideration.

Chronos, or time as we now experience it, will be different in the coming ages. Where we were once concerned about our past and constantly worried about our future, God has prepared a better situation, where those considerations will be no more. **In other words, we will be able to live and love in the eternal present.** All of our mistakes in the past will be corrected, and all of our worries about the future, will be no more, thanks to our Father.

It could also mean, although I cannot prove it from scripture, that our current limitations with chronos, the inability to move backward or forward in time, will be eliminated. Maybe that benefit will be used for the furtherance of our education. Maybe we will be like Him – able to see the beginning from the end and the end from the beginning. Whatever the case, we have much to look forward to 😊.

Epilogue

This article is about the repetition of the number three throughout the Bible and the possibility that these threes are meant to reveal God's plan for the ultimate reconciliation of all people. While pondering this notion some years back, I heard a song for the first time, and it was so moving. It is called *Passacaglia*. I didn't know the meaning of the word; I just knew I loved the song.

After days and days of it playing over and over in my mind, and while writing some of the beginning contents of this article, I asked the Lord if He was trying to tell me something. I then googled the word, and below is what I found. (I did not cherry-pick the parts I wanted you to see; this is a complete definition.)

Passacaglia is a musical form architecturally designed to be serious in nature. It is usually a base ostinato (something repeated slowly, over and over again), ***and written in*** (of all things), ***triple meter.***

After reading this definition, I believe that God winked and gave me some assurances that this article was indeed on the right track. Here, we find a musical form by His design – an expression of his plan written in triple meter, slowly revealed, and repeated over and over again in His Word. It's simply beautiful.

God teaches with all that surrounds us, wherever we find ourselves. He can move us with love, language, math, science, the arts, and in this case, music. The uncovering of something that has been hidden until now is yet another example of how our personal journeys of discovery can be so thrilling; it's the kiss of life. Thank You Father!