

Hell and the gospel

Part 5 – Is there hope for everyone, including those in hell?

The question at the end of Part 4 was, “Is there hope for everyone, then?” - hope, that is, that Jesus can save even the worst people who ever lived, including those in hell? Can we extend hope **that far** as Christians, to the point we can say with confidence that no one stays in hell forever?

But what else **can** a Christian say when faced with the reason “**God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Jesus),” verse 19?** The reason is clear, that “**through Christ,” verse 20,** God can and will “**reconcile to himself ALL things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”** And the best example is ourselves, **verse 21,** because there was a time when “**you were alienated from God ... but now,” verse 22,** “**he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight.”** Well, if God managed to do that for us, what’s to stop him doing it for everyone else? No wonder Paul says that Christians are “**not moved from the HOPE held out in the gospel,” verse 23.** We become unshakeable in our belief that what God has done for us he can most certainly do for others.

The “**hope held out in the gospel**” is that God has made his “**peace**” with all humanity “**through (Jesus’) blood, shed on the cross.”** The death of Christ, therefore, reaches through to EVERY human being. No one lives beyond God’s saving power, including those in hell, because if hell can stop people being saved, then hell is more powerful than Christ’s death, isn’t it? But that’s not what Scripture says. Through Christ’s death, God has the power and means to save everyone and everything. His reconciling power exceeds the power of hell, which is why Christians **do** say with confidence that no one stays in hell forever, because hell is clearly no barrier to God because of Christ.

But doesn’t Scripture also say “**when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels,” 2 Thessalonians 1:7,** that “**He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified,” verses 8-10?** Surely that’s saying that hell DOES claim some victims, and people ARE shut out of heaven and destroyed forever, because they refuse to obey what Jesus says in the gospel to them. Surely, then, they’re **beyond** reconciliation, aren’t they? And are there not tons of other verses that confirm that too, like all those “final fate of the wicked” verses in the book of Revelation.

In **Revelation 21:8**, for instance, “the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” And that’s the end of them forever, right? It’s a “second” or final death, in which they’re tossed into “the lake of burning sulfur,” **Revelation 20:10**, “where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” And once you’re thrown in there, you’re stuck in there forever, “shut out from the presence of the Lord,” and punished with never-ending agony, right?

But why, staying in the context of these verses in Revelation, does **Revelation 21:25** say that “**On no day will its gates EVER BE SHUT**”? If the gates to God’s presence are closed off forever to the wicked, and the only ones allowed into the “Holy City, the new Jerusalem” (verse 2) are “those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life,” **verse 27**, then why are the gates being left open, and to whom? And why, in **Revelation 22:17**, do “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ ... Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life,” if by this time there shouldn’t be anybody left who is “thirsty”? They’re either in the City with all their needs met, or they’re in hell.

But here we’ve got people being invited into the City because they haven’t drunk of the water of life yet, so who are they? Well, **Revelation 21:24** talks of “the nations” and “the kings of the earth,” so, in context, there are people all over the world at this time who haven’t yet tasted of the water of life in Jerusalem, but the gates are open to them if they wish to come in and try it.

But if everyone outside the City is supposed to be sealed in hell forever, what would be the point of inviting them into the City? Or, if all the wicked have been permanently shut out from God’s presence, who is there left to open the gates to? Or, if they’ve all been killed off in the second death, why are there people OUTSIDE the City who are still alive? And if only “those who wash their robes have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city,” **Revelation 22:14**, then how come those who haven’t washed their robes are being invited into the City too?

And we know what “wash their robes” means in **Revelation 7:13**, when “One of the elders” asks, “These in white robes - who are they and where did they come from?” And the answer is, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,” **verse 14**. Those who come out of this world and cross the great divide from death to life are those who trust in God’s “glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (Ephesians 1:6). They understand that it’s only because of Christ’s sacrifice that God adopts us as his children and makes us holy and blameless in his sight (Ephesians 1:4-5). A washed robe, then, is worn by a person who trusts totally in Christ’s sacrifice for his salvation.

But it took a stint in “great tribulation” first (back in Revelation 7:13) to get that. These are people who went through life not realizing that God “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13). So they lived in a “great tribulation” of frustration, ignorance and guilt, never realizing that every shameful act and every deceitful thought of theirs had been forgiven by the blood of the Lamb. Their conscience never let them rest, therefore, and they never had peace.

But then they heard the gospel and the HOPE that it held out, that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them,” **2 Corinthians 5:19**, at which point they began to “come out” of the great tribulation they’d been in - of trusting in themselves for whatever they were trying to accomplish in life - and they put all their “hope in Christ” (Ephesians 1:12). They washed their hands of the shameful, deceitful lives they’d been living, hung up their old lives on the cross with Christ, and took on board the new life Jesus would live in them through the Spirit. They now had robes “made white in the blood of the Lamb,” giving them free access to the tree of life and all that they could drink from the healing, transforming water of life flowing from God’s throne in the Holy City.

To the rest of humanity, meanwhile, still stuck in their self-destructive pride, the call keeps going out through the gospel to “Come” and try the water too.

But to try it people have to want it. They have to be thirsty enough to WANT to come through the gates to where the water is “flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city,” **Revelation 22:1-2**. Their minds need to be open to Jesus saying, “I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life,” **Revelation 21:6**. In other words, they realize, at last, who Jesus is and THEY want a part of him too. And to those who have a thirst like that, the gates are open.

And that’s the key: they’re thirsty. To the thirsty the gates are open. No thirst, no enter, because in **verse 27**, “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful.” So there’s a sentry at the gate, so to speak, keeping out those who AREN’T thirsty yet for what Jesus has to offer, and don’t want their shameful actions and deceitful attitudes cleaned up and healed. They are kept “OUTSIDE” the city, **Revelation 22:15**. BUT - **they’re still alive!** Despite being thrown into the Lake of Fire and despite their second death, they’re still alive, outside the City, being invited by those inside the City to come in and join them!

But why bother inviting people into the City if they’re not the least bit interested in what Jesus has to offer? Because those inside the City “are not moved from the hope of the gospel.” They keep calling out to the lost because of their unshakeable belief that God is reconciling ALL things to himself through Jesus Christ, with NO EXCEPTIONS.

And why would they believe that? Because “I (Jesus) hold the keys to death and Hades,” **Revelation 1:18**. Hell can’t lock out Jesus, because HE holds the key. He, therefore, gets the last word on the fate of humanity, not death, hell or the devil. And Jesus **told** us what our fate is too, in **John 12:32**: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw ALL men to myself.” So, from the moment Jesus was lifted up on the cross, and then lifted up again in his resurrection, a new age began in which he set about releasing us from whatever hell we’re in, and to “draw” us all to himself and to the throne of God.

And **from** that throne flows “the river of the water of life,” **Revelation 22:1**, and “on each side of the river stood the tree of life,” the leaves of which “are for the healing of the nations,” **verse 2**, and “NO LONGER WILL THERE BE ANY CURSE,” **verse 3**. So that’s where Jesus is taking us, to where nothing stands in the way of anyone coming to him for healing who wants it. For the hordes of people who haven’t understood yet who Jesus is and what he’s offering, the gates of the City are open to them. The lock-out is no more. To those who’ve been living in torment day and night in a hell they could not escape from, the curse has been lifted. Jesus is saying, “Come.” And all they have to do is obey his call, and they’ll find the gates wide open.

So God hasn’t forgotten anyone, and nor does he reject them, even AFTER “the great white throne” judgment of **Revelation 20:11-25**, or after the second death and the Lake of Fire in **Revelation 21:8**. In Revelation we see that even AFTER judgment is made, God is STILL offering healing to the nations. The message of Revelation, told in wonderfully dramatic terms to the early Church, is that God NEVER gives up calling out to people, “Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take of the free gift of the water of life.”

God isn’t interested in leaving people in hell to rot. They’re not cut off, destroyed, or left to languish in an inescapable prison forever. Instead, we see in Revelation what Peter said in **2 Peter 3:9**, that God is “patient with (us), not wanting ANYONE to perish.”

But if God doesn’t want anyone to perish in hell, why does he allow hell to exist at all? Because hell isn’t bad. It serves God’s purpose wonderfully. How? It creates a thirst. It makes people thirsty enough to **want** the water of life and hungry enough to **seek** the tree of life, so that they “come” to Jesus of their own accord to be cleaned up and healed. They are “drawn” to Christ, not forced against their will.

We see it happening to the Rich Man in **Luke 16**. He’s lived a life of cruel, unpitiful selfishness and now he’s “in hell, where he was in torment,” **Luke 16:23**. Up to this point he’s been unreachable in his arrogance and indifference, but in **verse 24** he’s begging “Father Abraham” to “send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” Hell has made him thirsty! It’s certainly got his attention and humbled him, even to the point he’s now **seeking** help too.

He's nowhere near the stage of "washing his robes" yet, or "making them white in the blood of the Lamb," which is why he's still stuck in hell with a "great chasm" still separating him from Abraham, **verse 26**. But he's nibbling, at least, at the FIRST crucial step toward putting his hope in Christ. He's thirsty. He's realized the terrible predicament he's in, that his life of riches and selfishness has come to nothing, and now he's face-to-face with himself as he really is. He's a worthless nobody who deserves the torments of hell, and now he's stuck with this empty shell of himself and his useless life forever. And he becomes desperate. He begs for just a tiny bit of relief.

It's the first crack in the cocoon, the first little pinprick piercing the hard shell of his arrogance. He watches as his life leaks out before him, trickling into a fetid pool of ghastly reality. But this is precisely what hell is for. It burns away all the clothes we're wearing to reveal the real self beneath. Or as Paul phrases it, everyone's "work will be shown for what it is, because **the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.**" **1 Corinthians 3:13**.

Burnt to a cinder will be the carefully nurtured image of ourselves that we've created. Revealed beneath will be what we really are. What our real motives are. What we really believe. What's truly in our hearts, and whether we really care for anyone but ourselves. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight," **Hebrews 4:13**. "Everything is uncovered, and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." All will be revealed.

But why? Because the first step to trusting in Christ, or to entering the Holy City, is desperation. We despair of ourselves. We despair of our insane world. We feel empty, parched and helpless. It's how Paul felt when the law revealed he was totally at the mercy of his sinful nature. In desperation he cried out, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" **Romans 7:24**. Please, I need help. I'm desperate.

And we all have to come to that point some time in our lives, because what would make us need Christ otherwise? That's why "EVERYONE will be salted with fire," **Mark 9:49**. We all go under the hammer - a baptism of fire, **Luke 3:16** - the purpose of which is to "burn up the chaff," **verse 17**. It consumes all the useless rubbish in our lives until we see ourselves as we really are, to the point we wonder how on earth any of us can "endure the day of his coming," **Malachi 3:2**, and we ask "Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap."

Up against Jesus Christ and his ability to see right through us and burn off all the chaff to reveal the true us beneath, what chance do we stand? Up against the scrubbing brush and abrasive soap designed to remove every stain and impurity, what's left of us worth salvaging? But that's the hell the baptism of fire takes us into to develop a thirst in us for what Jesus has to offer us instead. And if that baptism of fire has to include the likes of a "lake of fire" or a "second death" type of hell, so be it, because it works.

And the proof that it works is the Church, because we're the first to be put through the baptism of fire. "Judgment begins with the family of God," **1 Peter 4:17**. And at times that judgment is hell, because it includes suffering (verse 12) and "grief in all kinds of trials," **1 Peter 1:6**, some of which are "beyond our ability to endure so that we despaired even of life," **2 Corinthians 1:8**.

But despair, Paul realized, helps. It happens to Christians so that "we might not rely on ourselves but on God," **verse 9**. Despair makes us seek out the One with the keys to death and hell for deliverance. It tunes our ears to Jesus calling out to us, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life." It makes us want to "obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1:8) when Jesus calls to us, "COME TO ME, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," **Matthew 11:28**.

Whatever hell we're going through, therefore, is a means to a wonderful end. It creates a thirst in us for the healing, soothing water of life pouring from the throne of God where Jesus is. It draws us to him so that we answer his call to "Come" and experience him raising us up, so that eventually "On him we set our hope that he will continue to deliver us," **2 Corinthians 1:10**.

That's what Jesus is after, that we SET our hope in him as we discover that hell is only "for a little while," **1 Peter 1:6**, and it's always with one end in mind - to get us to "obey the gospel of Christ" that states very clearly that in everything Jesus does for us and to us is purely for "the salvation of your souls," **verse 9**.

And we in the Church are the first to discover that, which is WHY we "are not moved from the hope of the gospel." Our minds have become "SET" in hope because we've discovered that God doesn't leave US in hell forever. He lets us suffer for a while but it's never "everlasting." So when reading a phrase like "everlasting destruction" in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, our own experience tells us it can't mean "forever," because God never leaves us in despair and hell forever. It only lasts for as long as it's needed, or until its purpose is fulfilled. The Greek for "everlasting" in that verse - AEONIOS - means the same thing too. It means "age-lasting," from AEON meaning "age." So destruction is total **during "the age"** that it's needed, but in Revelation that age has ended and the gates are open to all who thirst. "No longer will there be any curse."

And our own experience proves it. God never curses us with suffering and trials that go on forever. It's from our own experience, then, as well as Scripture, that we get our confidence to say that no one stays in hell forever. It may take a while for hell to have its desired effect, but the hope that we are never moved from is that "ALL nations might believe and obey him," **Romans 16:26**, and eventually "EVERY knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord," **Philippians 2:10-11**.