

Hell is Ultimately Empty

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I do not question that the New Testament contains references to “*Gehenna*”—usually translated as “hell”—and that in early Christian usage it often refers to a place or destiny of ultimate punishment. And I do not challenge the fact that many of the references to hell describe the means of punishment as burning fire.

However, I am convinced that the Gospel of Jesus Christ—with its grand themes of incarnation, cross, resurrection, and grace—demands that hell is ultimately empty.

To argue this thesis, I must first address common assumptions about hell.

DUAL DESTINY

The images and concepts in Christian tradition that emphasize hell as ultimate punishment comprise a pattern of thinking I call **dual destiny—some folk are destined for salvation while others are destined for damnation**. Dual destiny thinking pervades Western Christian and secular cultures.

Critical to the internal logic of this pattern of thinking is this question: **How is it decided whether one is saved or damned?** Two major responses to this question have developed in Christian tradition over the centuries.

The first answer pivots around how a person has lived her life, how she has conducted herself. Usually this is evaluated by whether she has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; 2) lived a holy and righteous life; and 3) has faith.

Each of these criteria raises other questions, such as, ‘how is it known whether someone has truly accepted Jesus Christ, such that she would know whether she is saved or not?’ Personal attitude and conduct become the crucial determining factors for whether one is saved or not.

In one way or another, this first response claims that **persons ultimately get what they deserve**. Some deserve hell and others deserve heaven. I call this pattern of understanding the **eschatology of just deserts**. God may be the one who decides the criteria for the deserts, and God may be the one who administers the deserts, but it is how a person has lived her life that determines whether she is ultimately saved or damned.

The second answer to the question of how dual destiny is determined is quite different. It starts with the judgment that all persons are sinners and therefore deserving of some punishment. It is God, however, who determines who will be forgiven and thereby saved and who will remain unforgiven and thereby damned. **Those who are saved are saved by the grace of God, not by their just deserts, but those who are damned are just getting what they deserve.**

The fourth century theologian, Augustine and the sixteenth century reformer, John Calvin are the great representatives of this second answer, convinced as they were that it is **God’s grace alone that saves us**. But, unfortunately, they both were limited by their conviction that ultimately there **must** be a dual destiny of some kind—there **must** be a place of eternal suffering. They did not want that destiny, however, to be

determined by human conduct, which they both believed would be a form of **works righteousness**.

The concept of dual destiny, then, requires a belief that **God's justice is finally retributive: justice entails giving persons what is their due—meting out rewards and punishments**—however their due is determined. In the first answer, people get finally what they deserve. In the second answer some people are saved by God's sovereign grace, not by their deserts, even though some others are damned to hell by theirs.

THE LOGIC OF SALVATION

What happens if we were to **rethink the logic of dual destiny and just deserts starting with God's merciful incarnate work in Jesus Christ and the logic of salvation?**

Consider how we characterize what God has done in Jesus Christ. **The God of Israel becomes incarnate in the Jew Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection God encounters the powers of sin and evil and takes them into the divine Life itself, thereby depriving them of their power to alienate humans ultimately from God's gracious love.**

Let's say with the fourth century **Apostles' Creed that the crucified Christ descended into hell, thereby emptying it of the power to be the ultimate destiny of any of God's creatures.** What happens in Jesus Christ affects all humans before God. God will not longer count their sins against them and extends to all a merciful forgiveness. Let's call this, **justification**—all are forgiven and justified in Christ, whether they know it or not.

But, of course, **the church becomes that community that says “yes” to what God has done in Christ.** The church is comprised of those folk who are transformed by the grace of God in Christ through the Spirit. They **live differently** from the way others might live who are trapped by the domination of the principalities and powers of evil. They live as forgivers of enemies and as lovers of their neighbors.

People who know God's love and grace in Christ find themselves propelled on a **journey** of accepting that grace in how they live. Yet, this is a narrow road less traveled, and few are they who undertake it in earnestness, relinquishing their inclination for violence, hatred, and revenge. Let us call this journey **sanctification**.

There are many, however, who still live under the domination of sin: they are alienated from God, from their neighbors, and from their own created nature. They burn under hatred, revenge, violence, despair, and selfishness—**they are stalked by hell!** In terms of how folk live their lives in time, we might even say there is a sort of dual destiny in it—some folk live now under hellish conditions of alienation from God, from others, and from their own created nature.

But what about salvation in the next life—that **ultimate destiny** awaiting folk beyond death? Do we think that, because we are followers of Christ, we will be saved as our just deserts for so following? Note that this implies that those who do **not** follow Christ—even though forgiven in Christ—are nevertheless destined after death for ultimate alienation from God in a consuming, hellish fire?

This raises the interesting question of whether we followers of Christ finally trust our own righteousness as we ultimately face God, or do we trust the gracious forgiveness of God? I think we would have a hard time saying that somehow we have a just claim on God's salvation.

Rather, I think we might well re-examine the logic of dual destiny, just deserts, and ultimate destiny and realize that **we proclaim a Gospel that is rooted in the sovereign ultimacy of God's love and grace.** Just deserts for all is not what is manifest in the resurrected Jesus Christ. Instead, it is a resurrected hope quite beyond our reckoning of what we and others deserve!

HELL IS ULTIMATELY EMPTY

Then we pray and hope that hell is ultimately empty because of what God has done for all in Jesus

Christ and will do in whatever future might yet unfold.

Does this diminish the importance of confessing Christ and living in discipleship to him, even though that discipleship does not earn one's ultimate salvation? **How could the living a life of joyful discipleship, undaunted by the powers of evil, perpetually striving to love the neighbor and even the enemy, and repudiating the need for recourse to violence as the just deserts for some folk — how could that sort of life ever be regarded as negligible?** It is a wonderful life to love God for God's own sake and not for the sake of earning God's favor, being empowered to love God by God's own grace and love in Jesus Christ.

Why was it ever important to Christians that, for their own salvation to be meaningful, some others—especially those others called evil-doers—must be truly and ultimately damned? Such thinking undervalues and underestimates the radical power of God's grace.

There is a Gospel that arises dramatically from the New Testament's testimony to God's incarnate love in Jesus Christ. It is good news that unleashes hope for the world and builds up the church's faith.

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