

## **Heaven & Hell in the Afterlife,**

### **According to the Bible**

The idea that God is an angry figure who sends those He condemns to a place called Hell, where they spend eternity in torment separated from His presence, is missing from the Bible and unknown in the early church. While Heaven and Hell are decidedly real, they are experiential conditions rather than physical places, and both exist in the presence of God. In fact, nothing exists outside the presence of God.

This is not the way traditional Western Christianity, Roman Catholic or Protestant, has envisioned the afterlife. In Western thought Hell is a location, a place where God punishes the wicked, where they are cut off from God and the Kingdom of Heaven. Yet this concept occurs nowhere in the Bible, and does not exist in the original languages of the Bible.

While there is no question that according to the scriptures there is torment and "gnashing of teeth" for the wicked, and glorification for the righteous, and that this judgment comes from God, these destinies are not separate destinations. The Bible indicates that everyone comes before God in the next life, and it is because of being in God's presence that they either suffer eternally, or experience eternal joy. In other words, both the joy of heaven, and the torment of judgment, is caused by being eternally in the presence of the Almighty, the perfect and unchanging God.

This is not a new interpretation or a secret truth. It has been there all along, held by the Church from the beginning, revealed in the languages of the Scriptures, which were spoken by the Christians of the early church era. This understanding was held by nearly all Christians everywhere for the first 1000 years of the Church's existence, and, except where influence by western theologies, continued to be held by Christians beyond Western Europe and America even up to this day (including the roughly 350 million Orthodox Christians worldwide).

When you examine in context the source words which are translated as "hell" in English language Bibles the original understanding becomes clear. You will find that "hell" is translated from four different Greek and Hebrew words. These words are not interchangeable in the original language, yet, incredibly, in English-language bibles these words are translated differently in different places to fit the translators' theology (rather than allow the words of scripture to determine their theology). Not only did English translators dump these four very different words into one meaning, they were not even consistent with it and chose to translate these same words with different meanings in different places. It is no wonder that English readers of the Bible are confused.

If one examines what the early Church Fathers wrote about "hell" and the afterlife, it will be seen that they too understood that there is no place called hell, and that both paradise and torment came from being in God's presence in the afterlife.

When you examine what the Roman Catholic Church teaches and what most Protestants believe about the afterlife, and compare that with the scriptures and early Church beliefs, you find large disparities. You will also find their innovative doctrines were not drawn from the Bible or historic Church doctrine, but rather from the mythology of the Middle Ages, juridical concepts, and enlightenment rationalizations, all alien to early Christian thought.

### **The Afterlife According to the Hebrew Scriptures**

Sheol is one word sometimes translated as "Hell" in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, this word is a proper noun, that is a name or title, so properly it should not have been translated but simply transliterated, as is done with other names. The literal meaning of this Hebrew word is simply "subterranean retreat". Sheol was not understood as a physical place since it exists in the spirit world, but it is a spiritual "place" associated with dead people. It was understood that when a person dies, their body is buried, and their soul goes to reside in Sheol. That is the fate for all people who die, both the righteous and the wicked. According to Hebrew scholars, anything more detailed is conjecture and

speculation.

Sheol was translated as "hell" in a number of places where it was indicating a place for the wicked, which is consistent with western thought. But it was also translated as "grave" and as "pit" in a number of other places where it was clearly not a place of the wicked. Yet there are other Hebrew words for grave and pit, so why did it not occur to the translators that if the author wanted to mean pit or grave they would have used them? It can be seen that where Sheol fit the translators' idea of hell as a place of torment, they interpreted it one way, as hell, and simply used the word another way if it did not, confusing those who are trying to understand the Scriptures in translation.

In historic Jewish understanding, it is the perception of the individual in Sheol that makes the difference. This same "place" called Sheol is experienced by the righteous as "garden", the Garden of Eden or Paradise, i.e. "heaven". Moreover, Sheol is experienced by the wicked as the "fires of gehennom", i.e. punishment or "hell".

What is it that causes this same place to be experienced differently by the righteous and the wicked? According to the Jews (and by inheritance, the Christians as well) it is the very presence of God. Since God fills all things and dwells everywhere in the spirit world, there is nowhere apart from Him. Moreover, evil sinners, the enemies of God, experience His presence, His Shechinah glory, as punishment. Yet the righteous bask in that same glory, and experience it as the love and joy of God, as Paradise.

Consider Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who refused to worship the idol in Babylon (Daniel 3). They were thrown by King Nebuchadnezzar into the "fiery furnace" which was heated "seven times more". The significance of "seven" is a number symbolic of the "furnace" of Heaven, the place where God dwells. The three Jews were unharmed by the fire where one "like the Son of God" was among them. However, the same flames of fire killed the king's "most mighty" soldiers. This is an analogy to how the presence of God is light and warmth to those who love him, and pain and destruction to those who oppose

him, yet it is the same "fire."

It's also useful to consider the ancient Greco-Roman pagan understanding of the heavens and Hades. Though it was not fundamental to Hebrew theology, the Greek view was still sometimes referenced or borrowed, because these ideas were familiar and prevalent in the culture.

The ancient pagan Greek view, later adopted by the Romans, was that heaven was a physical place up in the sky. The word for heaven is used interchangeably with the location of the objects of the sky, as in "heavenly bodies", and for the dwelling place of the gods. That is why the Greek word for heaven and sky is the same; there was no distinction made between them in the earliest writings, but eventually they were also understood to be more as a metaphor for the spiritual heaven.

For the ancient pagan Greeks, Hades was a place, but was sometimes also personified in folk mythology. The physical place was where all humans go when they die, a site located at the center of the earth. Like Sheol, it was the final abode of all humans, but unlike Sheol, it was taken to be a geographic site, the literal "underworld" in folk mythology. It was also taken as a metaphor for the place of final rest. Hades was also sometimes taken as the name of the ruler of this place, the pagan god Hades, also known as Pluton by the Romans.

In Greco-Roman mythology Heaven was reserved only for the gods, and after death mere mortals could only hope to find a safe place in Hades to spend eternity. The early Greco-Roman Hades was a very literal and even primitive concept, compared to the Jews' more spiritual Sheol. If a person was dead, they were in Hades, and there was no other option; only a very rare few heroes challenged the gods of the heavens and were immortalized in the stars.

The pre-Christian Greek language had thus developed in this kind of world view, both heaven and Hades as a physical and literal existence up in the sky, or down under the

ground. Although these later became more metaphorical in more developed pagan writings, from this is where the universal concept of "up" for heaven or Paradise, and "down" for the place of the dead came. It is used metaphorically by both the Jews and pagans to describe mankind's relationship with God, and so became a universal cultural concept. This is why there are so many Biblical references to God being "up" in heaven, and Sheol being "down" in the "under parts of the earth". However, neither the Jews nor the early Christians took these ideas literally as the ancient Greeks and Romans may have, but understood "up" and "down" as spiritual rather than physical realities.

For the Jews and early Christians, even Sheol was not separated from God. Translating directly from the Greek of the Septuagint Psalms 139:7 and 8 "Where can I go away from your spirit? And away from your presence, where can I flee? If I go up into heaven, you are there. If I go down into Hades, there is your presence."

When Jewish scholars translated their scriptures into Greek in the third century BC, they used the Greek word Hades interchangeably for the Hebrew Sheol in the Septuagint. Strictly speaking, the pagan understanding was very different, but Jewish scholars adapted "Hades" for their use. It is one of many examples of changed, allegorical, or metaphorical non-Hebrew words used in the Bible borrowed from Greek pagan mythology. In the New Testament, Hades is used in a number of places as the Greek equivalent to Sheol as well.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, Sheol is translated 31 times as Hell in the King James Bible, and similarly in the Revised Standard and NRSV. In a number of other places it is translated as "grave" or "pit" and once even as "dust". It appears the translators did not have a very consistent understanding as to what Sheol means, translating the same word differently in different places. The idea of "Hell" as a physical place of torment, apart from the presence of God, had already taken root, and the translation fit the preconception rather than the original meaning of the word.

Gehennah is another word translated as "hell". It was known to the Jews as a physical

place, a valley outside to the south of Jerusalem. It literally means in Hebrew "valley of the sons of Hinnah". Here child sacrifices were once made to the pagan god Molech. Gehennah is mentioned in 2 Chronicles 28:3 and 33:6, and Jeremiah 7:31, 19:2-6, and appears in many traditional extra-Biblical Jewish writings. After this area came under Jewish control a memorial fire was kept burning there. Later it became a dumping place for refuse, dead animals, and eventually prisoners' bodies, or the bodies of the poor that were not claimed by any family. Trash fires were kept continually burning there for sanitary reasons. It was like many landfills: a smoky, foul-smelling place with carrion-eating birds circling overhead.

By the time of Jesus this place became a well known metaphor for the fate of those condemned and judged by God. Expressions like "the fiery pit" or the "fires of Gehennah" were equivalent to the unrighteous' experience of God's presence. Gehennah was the place where evil and sinful people ended up. In Jewish mystical writings it was believed that this place is where the final destruction of the wicked would occur at Messiah's arrival. Because this is when the resurrection would occur, all the evil lawbreakers would be resurrected and standing in Gehennah when God reclaims the earth. In the final battle, God's enemies, the evil ones, would be burned up, "As wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God" as it says in Psalm 68. Jesus affirmed and clarified this teaching and Christians now believe this will occur on Messiah's return.

This experience of Gehennah was used as an analogy to express what happens to those who oppose the God of the Jews. Yet even it was not a place God "sends" people. The fire itself was understood to be how the wicked experienced the Shechinah glory of God, as a burning judgment fire.

Therefore, usage of this word is interchangeable with "judgment", and quite different than Sheol. To be forgiven of your offenses was to be rescued from "the fiery pit", or rescued from judgment. You would still go to Sheol until the resurrection, but in glory rather than in torment.

Notice however that in English, the translators rendered Gehennah as the "valley the sons of Henuh" in some places in the scriptures and in other places as "hell," rather than just making a direct translation of the words wherever it appears. This confuses the reader, who could get a more consistent understanding of the meaning of the word if it was rendered accurately as "Gehennah" every time, or more properly as "the Valley of the Sons of Henuh".

There are numerous references to God's presence being like fire in the Hebrew Scriptures. In addition, before the invention of the electric light, any reference to "light" meant "fire" in one form or another. For example, "The Lord thy God is a consuming fire" (Numbers); God "...appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush," (Exodus); "The fire of the Lord burns among them" (Numbers); "the Lord descends upon it in fire" (Exodus); "You have refined us as silver in a fire" (Psalms); and "Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire" (Psalms). These are a few of the many Old Testament references to God being perceived as fire; it was how the Jews understood humans experience God's Shechinah glory.

No human could bear to look at the blazing holy presence of God: not Moses, who hid his face, not Abraham, not Adam or Eve after they fell from Grace. No human could look at the face of God and live to tell about it.

God is described as fire in the following verses; Gen 19:24, Ex 3:2, 9:23, 13:21-22, 19:18, Num 11:1-3, 4:24, Ne 9:12, Ps 66:10, 104:4, Is 66:15, among others places.

Another interesting word study to examine is the Hebrew words used in the Old Testament when describing how God "punishes" people in the English bibles. Ten different Hebrew words are translated as "punish" in this context, yet none carries our meaning of punishment in English. The most common word "paqad" rendered 31 times as punish, simply means "to visit" or "to remember." The word "anash" [used 5 times] simply means "to urge" or "compel", "chasak" [occurs 3 times] means to restrain, "avown" [used 12

times] means sin. This also implies the cost or penalty for being evil or causing offence. One interesting word translated as punish, "yakar" means to chastise, but also means "to add value" as in chastising a child makes him more valuable. There are a few other words rendered as punish, but they occur only once each. As can be seen, none of these words clearly indicates that God does the punishing. Apparently for the translators, every time God visits or remembers His people, he is "punishing" them, but that is not how Jews understand this word. Nor would Jews automatically assume that a visit from God was a bad thing, either.

This kind of translation seems attributable to a presupposition of what these words mean, and intrinsically changes the meanings of these words from the original intent. The translators' own incorrect ideas have clouded their objectivity, an all-too-frequent occurrence with virtually all western language Bibles.

### **The Afterlife According to the New Testament**

Jesus and the Apostles were all Jews of course, as were nearly all the members of the first Christian Church. The first Christians saw themselves as inheritors of the covenant of Abraham, and the early Church of course had no New Testament, so they naturally understood the afterlife in the terms of the Old Testament. The Gospels and all of the epistles affirm this understanding as well, when read in the original Greek.

In the Gospel story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, Jesus clearly states that they both end up in the same place, in Hades. Hades of course is used to mean the same thing as Hebrew "Sheol," it simply means the place everyone goes when they die. In Hades they can see each other and talk to each other, although they are far off from each other. "And in Hades, he lifts up his eyes, being in torment, and sees Abraham far off, and Lazarus in his bosom." [Luke 16:23]. All of them are in Hades received bad things, but now he is comforted, and you are in pain". See how he contrasts "but now" (in death), one is comforted, the other in torment. Neither does it say that God is punishing him, he is simply "in pain" while there.



They were separated by a large gulf, but it is clearly spiritual and not physical, since they are not in the physical world, for neither would the Rich Man have a physical tongue to cool with physical water from Lazarus' physical finger. So it is a gulf that exists in the heart, a spiritual gulf that causes us to experience God's loving presence as paradise or torment. A gulf that was not placed there by God, but rather created by the choices and actions of the sinner.

Hades is translated as hell ten times in the New Testament, but it is also translated as "grave" in 1 Cor 15:55, another point of inconsistency.

In Revelation Chapter 20, it states that Death and Hades gave up their dead, and Death and Hades are placed in the lake of fire when God reclaims the world. If the ones in Hades were judged and will be in torment for eternity "far from the Lord" as so many think, why would these same ones be released from Hades when God returns? It is because all who have died reside in "Death and Hades" until that moment, when Death and Hades can no longer exist because God is present. The "lake of fire and brimstone" into which Death and Hades is placed, in the Greek would be grammatically correct to translate as the "lake of fire and divinity", or even "the lake of divine fire". When Death and Hades is placed in the fiery presence of God, in the "lake of divine fire", it is destroyed, because it is in the very presence of God, death can not exist when God is present.

It is interesting to examine the Greek word for "divine", it is from the Greek "theion", which could also mean "divine being", but also means "sulfur", or in Old English "brimstone" [lit. 'burning stone']. As strange as that sounds to us, it is because of the ancient understanding of the cosmic order of the nature of all things. All people in all cultures from the Near East to the West understood that there were four 'elements', these were: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. Their nature was that Earth and Water tended to go down toward Hades, and Air and Fire tended to go up toward heaven. This could plainly be seen when the heavenly fire, lightning, would hit a living tree and burn the "life" out of it. Anyone could see that the heat from the tree would go back to heaven in the fire, and the ash that remained would go

down into the ground. But there was this mysterious yellowish earth substance that behaved very differently, when placed in a fire it burn so brightly that your eyes could not bear to look at it. As it burned, it would release the heavenly substance that was trapped inside and it would rise back to heaven. Clearly, this "burning stone" was a divine substance, and as such, it was simply called "divinity. It was burned within a new temple to "purify" it before consecration, presumably when this burning stone released it's divinity, it causes all evil things to flee from the temple, and thus was the temple readied for worship.

Yet the word 'theion' is translated as "brimstone" or "sulfur" in Luke 17:29, Rev. 9:17, 14:10, 20:10, 21:8, which is where 'fire and brimstone' comes out of heaven, but it is equally interchange with the words "divine fire". Since this did not fit the translators' preconceived ideas, it is rendered always as brimstone in this context.

Elsewhere in Revelation it states that the "heat comes out of heaven" and burns the enemies of God, yet does not harm the ones with God's seal on their foreheads. So the same heat, the heat that is the very life and light that comes from God, burns the sinners, and does not harm the ones that love God.

Again, in many places God's presence and appearance is described as fire in the New Testament as well as in the Old. Examine for example, Matt 31:10-12, 25:41, Mark 9:49, Luke 12:49, Act 7:30, 1Cor 3:15, Heb 1:7, 12:29, Rev 3:18 and in numerous other places.

Typical is the verse where John the Baptist says "I baptize you with water, but the One that comes after me will baptize you with fire". The author of Hebrews writes that God is a consuming fire. Paul also writes that God is like the jeweler who burns gold in the fire to purify it. Jesus Himself states the he brings "fire" to the earth. That is, "divine fire".

Everywhere in the New Testament when humans come face to face with the Transfigured Jesus they cannot look at Him: Peter, James and John on Mt. Tabor, Paul on the road to Damascus-- humans hid their face and fell down in fear and trembling when confronted

with the revelation of Jesus as Almighty God. Old Testament figures did the same, but now, in the New Testament, it is revealed that this "holy" fire is present when Jesus reveals his nature. This is because Jesus is the incarnate God of the Old Testament.

A couple of these descriptions of the fire of God's presence are worth examining closely. Paul writes in 1 Cor 3:13 "Every man's work shall be made manifest...because it shall be revealed by fire, and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is." In Mark 9:49 Jesus says "For everyone will be salted with fire" (interestingly, in Greek this sentence has the grammatical structure of an obvious statement of fact, similar to "for [everyone knows that] everyone will be salted with fire"). Peter repeats this idea in 2Peter 3:7 "but now, by the same Word [that is Jesus], heaven and earth are saved and kept for fire on the day of judgment, and the destruction of impious men."

So clearly everyone experiences this fire caused by the presence of God. The Bible tells us there is no place apart from God, that he is everywhere and fills all things, so how can He create a place apart from Him? Moreover, why would He create a place just to punish the ones He says He loves unconditionally? That is not the nature of a loving God.

Since God is everywhere and fills all things, in the spirit world there is nowhere to escape from God even if you wanted to [Ps 139:7-8].

Translating 2 Thess 1:7-8 from the Greek literally, St. Paul tells the persecuted Thessalonians that they will "get relief at the revelation of the Lord Jesus coming out from heaven with His powerful angels in flames of fire". Yet this same presence of Jesus causes the ones persecuting them to "...be punished with everlasting destruction BECAUSE OF [Gr. "apo"] the presence of the Lord, and BECAUSE OF his mighty glory" (2 Thess 1:9). Further on Paul writes in 2Thess 2:8 that "the lawless one, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy by the breath [or "spirit"] of his mouth and make ineffective by the fantastic appearance of his presence". So the mere presence of Jesus makes the "lawless one" ineffective, yet gives relief and comfort to the Thessalonians.

Unfortunately many English translations insert a word that is not there in the Greek in verse 1:9, adding the idea that the wicked will be "separated" or "cut off" from the Lord's presence. This is a totally different meaning, and if Paul had wanted to say this he would have used the word "schizo," which is where we get the word for "scissors" and "schizophrenia" [lit. divided-mind]. The Greek word "apo" that Paul uses here is a preposition that indicates cause or direction: "because of," "out of," "caused by," "from," etc. The word "apo" appears 442 times in the New Testament, and it is NEVER used to indicate separation, location or position. For example "Apostles" in Greek "apo-stolon" literally means "those sent out from the fleet." The word "Apocalypse" literally means "out from cover," i.e. to reveal, hence the Book of Revelation. Also interesting is the word "apostate" which in Greek literally means "out from standing". If you were once in a condition to stand in God's presence, then "fell" away, you would not be able to stand any longer; you would be "out from standing," cowering and trying to hide from His presence.

The history of the English word "hell" is also revealing. The Old English word from which hell is derived is "helan", which means to hide or cover, and is a verb. So at one time the English church understood that to be judged a sinner meant one would cower and want to hide in fear when in God's presence. Unfortunately, because of the political expedience of controlling an often rebellious population, corrupt rulers in the West, in collusion with corrupt clergy, and adopting ideas from non-Biblical yet popular fantasy novels such as Dante's Inferno, corrupted the use of this word during the middle ages. Eventually turning a verb into a noun by popular usage, even if theologically insupportable from the Bible.

It is tragic that modern translators would insert the word "far from" or "cut off from" into 2 Thess 1:9, apparently because they had a preconception about what Paul was trying to say so they altered the text to fit. They added this little "clarifying" word that is not in the Greek text at all, changing the meaning and inserting their own ideas. If your preconceived idea is that Hell is a "place" that an angry God sends people away from his presence, in order to punish and hurt them, you would expect and look for ways that Scripture would support

your idea.

Clearly, when you read the Bible in the original languages you learn that there is no place apart from God, and there is no place that God put you to punish you. What scripture reveals is that all eventually will be in the fiery presence of the Lord, and this presence will be either "eternal torment" or "comfort and glory". Judgment and paradise both come from being in God's presence.

Another word translated incorrectly as Hell appears in 2 Peter 2:4. Saint Peter is warning about the swift destruction of false prophets and false teachers. In the Greek grammar he uses an obvious statement of fact by stating "For if God did not spare the sinning angels, but rather places them down in Tartarus, reserved for [a future] judgment.....the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of trials, and to reserve the unjust until the day of judgment." [2:9].

The word Tartarus is also a proper noun, that is a name of a place, and accordingly should not be changed into a different word, and certainly not the same word that used for Hades and Gehennah.

Tartarus originally came from Greek mythology and popular folk tales. It is the name of a prison in Hades that Zeus, after triumphing over the Titans, placed them, bound in chains to hold them for future punishment for crimes against humans. It was metaphorically seen as the place where justice was metered out in the spirit world, and this metaphor often found it's way into Jewish apocryphal writings about the end times. Saint Peter borrows this term and uses it in exactly the same way as it was used in popular contemporary writings by both Greeks and Jews; it is a place where "sinning angels" are bound and imprisoned, awaiting a future punishment. They are bound by God to prevent them from doing further harm, and they are judged for crimes against humanity. This image is seen in the ancient icon of the Resurrection, metaphorically depicted are "dark" angels, or demons, being bound in chains under the feet of the resurrected Christ, who broke the bonds of death and rendered

powerless the "sinning angels". Remember from 2 Thessalonians, where Saint Paul writes that the power of the presence of Christ made the "lawless One" powerless, and gave comfort to the Christians, which is exactly the same idea that Saint Peter is writing about in 2 Peter 2:4 through 9.

Again the translators made an improper interpretation of this passage because of preconceived ideas about the afterlife, changing the meaning and only adding to the confusion for English speaking Christians.

Also totally absent from the scriptures is any hint that demons are tormenting sinners. This again comes from Dante's Inferno and other pagan concepts, not from the Bible. Because any "sinning angels" in the presence of God, are also in torment, and their power is made ineffective.

### **The Afterlife According to the Church Fathers**

After the Gospels and Epistles were composed, in the centuries before Christians decided exactly which books would be in the New Testament, many gifted believers wrote books of commentary, sermons, apologetics, and stories of martyrdom. These eloquent early Christian writers confirm the Biblical view of the afterlife and add some clarifying details.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, in the late first and early second century, describe God as the furnace that a craftsman uses to temper a sword. When a properly prepared sword is placed within the fire, it makes it stronger and the sword takes on the properties of the fire, it gives off heat and light. However, this same fire will melt and destroy a sword that was not properly prepared.

St. Isaac the Syrian in the sixth century writes "Paradise is the love of God" and he also writes "...those who are punished in Gehannah, are scourged by the scourge of love". So the "fire" is the love of God, and we experience His love as either divine love, or as painful

"scourge".

St. Basil the Great (fourth century) points out that the Three Children thrown into the fiery furnace were unharmed by the fire, yet the same fire burned and killed the servants at the entrance to the furnace.

According to St Gregory the Theologian, God Himself is Paradise and punishment for man, since each man tastes God's "energies" (His perceptible presence) according to the condition of his soul. St. Gregory further advises the next life will be "light for those whose mind is purified... in proportion to their degree of purity" and darkness "to those who have blinded their ruling organ [meaning the "mind"]...in proportion to their blindness..."

St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes about the Second Coming of Christ, "the sign of the Cross [at His returning] will be terror to His foes, but joy to His friends who have believed in Him".

Lactantius (AD 260-330) wrote that on His return "there comes before Him an unquenchable fire".

St. John Chrysostom (AD 344-407) wrote [in homily LXXVI] "let us clothe ourselves with spiritual fire, let us gird ourselves with its flame. No man who bears flame fears those who meet him; be it wild beast, be it man, be it snares innumerable, so long as he is armed with fire, all things stand out of his way, all things retire. The flame is intolerable, the fire can not be endured, it consumes all. With this fire let us clothe ourselves, offering up glory to our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory, might, honor, now and ever and world without end. Amen."

A prayer of St. Simeon the Translator goes: "...Thou who art a fire consuming the unworthy, consume me not, O my Creator, but rather pass through all my body parts, into all my joints, my veins, my heart. Burn Thou the thorns of all my transgressions, Cleanse my soul and hallow Thou my thoughts [etc.] ...that from me, every evil deed and every passion may

flee as from fire..."

The Holy Orthodox Church, in keeping with Scripture and the most ancient Christian doctrine, teaches that all people come into the presence of God in the afterlife. Some will bask in joy because of that infinite love, glory, light, power, and truth that is Almighty God. Others will cower in fear and be in torment DUE TO THAT SAME PRESENCE. All the same, there will be some kind of separation or "great gulf".

"Life" in the Orthodox Church as defined by the Fathers, is experiencing the perfect, pure and infinite love of God in ultimate harmony and intimacy for eternity, and "death" is experiencing God's energies in torment, darkness and disharmony for eternity. It is only through Christ that we come to that place of perfect harmony, in this life, in this world. The goal of the Christian is not to get to "heaven" in the after life, but rather to come to a state of constant communion with the Holy Spirit, beginning in this life. We may bask in the presence of God's glory here and now, and in the afterlife for eternity.

Accordingly, from ancient times icons have shown the Saints dwelling in a place filled with the golden, uncreated divine light of God. With the icon we symbolically peer through this "window" into the spirit realm infused with God's energies. In the icon of the Heavenly Kingdom, we see Christ enthroned in the center as God Almighty, surround with the host of angels, His mother the Theotokos, and all the saints. However, at His feet you see others, also in His presence, who are being burned and tormented due to just being there, and have no escape. The larger more elaborate icons of the Resurrection show the Old Testament saints with halos looking on with joy, and others without halos on the other side of the gulf, looking on in fear and confusion, as Christ frees the captives of Death. He rescues all of humanity (represented by Adam and Eve being pulled from the tomb) and all of creation with them, from the beginning of time to the end of time.

It is not God's intention that his love will torment us, but that will be the inevitable result of pursuing our own selfish desires instead of seeking God. When we are in harmony with



God, we will bask in that presence. Yet, if we desire our own will and are in disharmony with God, we suffer in His presence. Satan is evil not just because he harms others, but because he is an angel of light who stands in the presence of God yet chooses to pursue his own selfish desires, which causes him to tremble in fear. Satan and his fallen angels, the demons, were thrown to the earth and he became the 'god of this world'. It can be speculated that Satan and his demons are on the earth because it is the only place they can escape God's presence, if only temporarily. This is why they will suffer for eternity after God reclaims the world at the end of this age, filling it with his presence. Then there will be nowhere to escape God, for both demons and evildoers.

So "hell" is not a "place" but rather a condition we allow ourselves to be in, not because of God's "justice" but because of our own selfish and sinful disobedience. In other words, we put ourselves in "hell" when we do anything other than seeking God's will. It is not that God wants to harm us; He loves us unconditionally, but torment is the result of coming into His pure presence when we are in an impure condition.

It is like spending your whole life in a cave or basement in darkness, never seeing the sun, then suddenly being thrust into bright sunshine. Your skin will burn, your eyes will burn, you will want to bury yourself under the rocks to try and escape this terrible thing pouring down on you, but there is no escape, just as described in Revelation. However, if you expose yourself to the sun regularly and often, eventually you will want nothing but to bask in the warmth and light of the sunshine. The same sunshine that torments one person brings warmth and pleasure to another. Similarly, if you get too close to the sun, you will be burned, not because the sun wants to burn you, because it is the sun's nature.

### **Roman Catholic and Protestant Understanding**

It is clear from the Scriptures and the Church Fathers there is no room in the afterlife for Purgatory, limbo, or any place apart from God, nor for Calvin's idea of predestination and "divine justice".

Neither in scripture, nor in the writings of the Saints do we see any such innovation as Purgatory or even of Hell as a place of torment apart from God.

Purgatory, according to the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" article 1030-1031, is defined as the place of "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified...after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven." The more purging that is necessary, the longer one must spend in purgatory. Further, in article 1032, "The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead..." presumably to hasten how quickly one may complete this purging.

Built into this uniquely Roman Catholic doctrine is the assumption that in the afterlife we would experience time passing the same way we do in the physical world. This is a mistake because there are enough hints in Scripture that time as we know it does not exist in the spirit world. For example: "... one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day". (2 Peter 3:8). Also the idea that the return of Christ is immanent, in addition to the prevalent use of the word 'eternal' throughout the Old and New Testaments. In the Revelation of St. John many scholars believe that St. John is not describing sequential events (which would be nonsensical, since the narrative jumps around so much) but the Saint is rather seeing all the events occurring simultaneously. It is like he is in a room with all this activity happening at once, and he says "then I turned and I saw...". He is describing the sequence in which he sees the visions, but that is not necessarily in the order that the events occurred.

Even modern science tells us that time and space are connected. Without physical space [i.e. creation], there is no time.

So it is very speculative to assume that time passes outside of creation the same way it does here. No sound doctrine can be built based on this assumption.

The Orthodox believe, from Scripture and the writings of the saints, that because God is perfect he does not change. However, imperfect humanity continues to change. So when someone in an imperfect "forever changing" condition comes into God's pure unchanging presence, it is experienced as darkness and torment. Presumably, at the time of death we lose the ability to change, since our condition will be "consolidated" by being "caught" in the pure, unchanging presence of God, which will also occur to the living at the Apocalypse. The idea of changing in Purgatory is incompatible with the timeless, changeless nature of the afterlife.

Furthermore, nowhere in the original language of the Bible does the Calvinistic idea occur of a place of "hellfire" torment, created especially by God so He can punish those he judges for eternity. Why would a God who loves us unconditionally torment us for eternity, because of an equally unbiblical notion of Divine Justice? In fact nowhere in the Bible does it explicitly state that it is God that punishes the sinners. If you put your hand in the fireplace, is it the fire's intention to punish you? Or is the torment you experience caused by your own foolish action? It is merely the nature of the fire to burn your unprotected skin.

## **Uncreated Energies**

The understanding of heaven and "punishment" [hell] in historic Christianity is inextricably linked to the biblical concept of the Uncreated Light of God. The Uncreated Energies (or "Light" the purest form of energy) are understood by the Orthodox to be the Energies of God. This Energy is the "consuming fire", the Shechinah glory, the fire that burns gold to purify it, as St. Paul writes. It is the fire that burns the weeds left in the field, the fire that burns the pruned branches, it is the lake of divine fire, and the thirst and burning that torments the Rich Man is this same Uncreated Energy. Yet, the same fire that torments the impure gives warmth and comfort to the pure of heart.

In fact the Greek word "energeia", and it's various forms, appears over 30 times in the new

Testament, yet it is not translated as "energy" even once in most popular English translations. It is variously rendered as operation, strong, do, in-working, effectual, be mighty in, shew forth self, and even simply dropped out of the sentence; everything except what it means. Yet, this word was well established in the Greek language in the first century. It was first used by Aristotle, some three centuries before Christ, as a noun, as "energy" in the metaphysical sense- which was borrowed in recent years in English as an engineering term. But even in a modern metaphysical sense, it is exactly as the ancient Greeks use the word, because it is the same word. Yet the translators insisted on ignoring how this word is actually used by Greek speakers and distorted it into a number of verbs and adjectives (or simply drop it from the verse), which leaves only confusion and misunderstanding for English readers.

When we are energized by the Divine Energies, we will radiate the pure Light of God. Translating directly from the Greek, Saint Paul writes to the Philippians [2:13] "For it is God who is energizing in you, according to His will and to energize for the sake of His being well-pleased." In verse 3:21 he further writes "[Christ] who will change the appearance of our humble bodies to take on the form of the body of His glory, through the energization of his Power..." And to the Ephesians in verse 1:19 "and what exceeding greatness of his power, in us who believe, through the energization of His mighty strength, energized in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him in the right hand of Him in the heavens" So this energy "in us" changes our bodies to glory, and was the same energy that raised Christ from the dead. This energy is in fact, the Grace of God, in Eph 3:7 St. Paul writes "That I was made an attendant through the gift of the Grace of God, granted to me by the energization of his Power".

This same Energy also has the power to heal, as St. James writes [5:16] "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed, prayers energized by a righteous one are very powerful". This same energy comes from the "one" that restrains evil, in II Thess 2:7 St. Paul writes "For already the mysterious lawless one is only restrained now by the Energies, until he comes out of the midst of it"

Receiving this Divine Energy is the results of faith in the true God, as St. Paul tells the Thessalonians in I Thess 2:12 "...[you received] ...the true Logos of God, which also energizes in you believers". Moreover, to the Galatians he asks a rhetorical question with an obvious answer [3:5] "Indeed, would it not be in vain, if the One providing you the Spirit and the powerful Energies in you, were by works of the law, or rather by hearing in faith?"

There are many stories in the historic tradition, both ancient and relatively modern, that tell of the saints radiating light when they pray (for example St. Mary of Egypt, St. Sava, St. Mathew of Ethiopia, and others). The Light that Christ radiated on mount Tabor during the Transfiguration is this Uncreated Light, seen in Christ revealing his true nature. The halos in icons are not rings or crowns (as often wrongly represented in western religious art) but rather a sphere of light, like the sphere of light around a candle in a dark room. This light that Christ, his mother the Theotokos, the angels and saints radiate in the icon is this Uncreated Light of God.

This is the Transforming Light that "makes all things new". Salvation is in fact this Energy assimilating us to God, "divinizing" the believers, making us "Christ-like", through the Energization of the Power of God. When we are in perfect harmony with God, the Holy Spirit energizes within us, and we too radiate this Uncreated Light. All of the saints radiate this Light of Christ. Interestingly, in properly rendered icons none of the Apostles have halos until after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out into the Church. This event, the Pentecost, is when the Apostles were "assimilated" into divination, transforming them [literally in the Greek "metamorphoses"] into Holy beings, into "non-earthly ones" (lit. in the Greek), and when, according to Tradition, the Holy Church had begun.

The Energy is Uncreated because it existed before creation, it is the Light and Truth and the Love and the Life that IS God. When we have that Truth, Love and Life of God, than we too will radiate this Divine Light.

The ancients understood that light was the purest form of energy. This is why there are so many biblical allusions to the sun for God. The sun was the source of "pure" light, life and heat, and this created light was likened to the Uncreated Light of God, the source of Everlasting "Zoe" and "Zesty", spiritual "life" and "heat" or more properly "vitality". This is why the term "illuminated" is used to describe the saints who saw these "divinizing" Visions in Heaven. In fact, it is impossible to properly understand the role of Light in theology if you do not understand it from the Light-Energy perspective.

Yet, Saint Paul also cautions the Roman about this Energy in 7:5 "for when we were in the flesh, passionate for sins according to the law, the Energy in our members brings fourth the fruit of death". And likewise he warns the Corinthians [II Cor 4:12] "For this reason it energizes death in us, though it is Life in you". And in Hebrews 4:12 another sober warning "For the living Logos of God, and [the living] Energies, also sharper than a two edged sword, passing through, dividing both soul and spirit, joints from marrows, judging the thought and intents of the heart". Note in this last verse in English bibles, the word "Energies" is just dropped from the text, yet the clear implication in the Greek is that the "logos" is one edge, and the "energy" is the other edge of the sword. Implying quite literally, without this Energy, one is not fully armed.

When we come face to face with this powerful Uncreated Light in an impure and sinful condition, we cower in fear and pain, for our impurities are revealed and "burned" by this illuminating Energy. Yet those who love God and want nothing but to be in constant communion with God, will strive towards purity and will bask in glory in this same Light. The same Energy that causes eternal death in the sinful, purifies and strengthens the faithful.

This is at the root of difference between the Eastern Orthodox and Western Christianity, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, this biblical concept of the Uncreated Energies of God. In the west, the mystery of the Divine Energies was abandoned because it could not be understood outside of the metaphysical perspective, and therefore juridical socialistic rationalism was adopted. The west continues to flounder in darkness and is unarmed

against the influence of the enemies of God, and therefore continues to innovate false theologies.

Tragically, in the west a few centuries after the Great Schism (1054 AD) an innovation (i.e. heresy) developed as a result of an attempt to rationalize God's purifying fires. Latin theologians surmised that God created a place called purgatory with purging fires to "purify" those that die with imperfect atonement, and they further rationalized that paying indulgences could buy your loved ones out of these painful purging fires faster. This rationalization also helped keep the church prosperous and coffers full.

The western ideas had its roots in Augustinian theology (who was influenced by the Greek pagan philosophers). Unfortunately Augustine could not read Greek and had to devise his own theology from imperfect Latin translations. Late in his life he recanted much of his earlier writings, an act which was ignored in the West. Both Luther and Calvin developed their own theologies from Augustine's erroneous writings, and ignoring Augustine's later retraction. This is how the pagan notion of a God that both punishes and rewards made its way into western Christian theologies. Another major influence was the 13th century fantasy novelist Dante, who's political satire known as the Inferno borrowed heavily from pagan mythology and bears little resemblance to Biblical eschatology.

Some Orthodox would contend that the western God, who both claims to love us, but also would condemn us to eternal punishment, is a schizophrenic God. It is reminiscent of the abusive groom who claims to love his bride but can not stop punishing her.

Calvin further rationalized if God is all knowing, then He knows who will be saved and who will not even before they are born, so therefore He must have created some people just so He can torment them in Hell for eternity. This is the infamous "predestination" of Calvin, which makes God the author of evil. This is not Biblical and certainly not Christian.

Ultimately this doctrine denies free will, the choice that all humans have to either pursue righteousness, or selfishness.

Therefore the difference in the understanding of the Uncreated Energies is not just a difference between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy, it is a difference between almost all of the heterodox and the Orthodox.

## **In Conclusion**

There is no "place" of torment, or even a "place" apart from God, because there is no "place" at all; you are outside of time and space. The "place" is actually a condition of either punishment ("hell") or paradise ("heaven") depending on how you experience the presence of God and His Uncreated Energies.

Consider a person who hates God, and anything to do with religion, and has done nothing but pursued his own self-centered desires all his life. It would be far more terrifying, and painful, to spend eternity in the fiery embrace of God's almighty and divine love with no escape, than to be far from Him.

Experiencing God's presence and His in-filling transforming Energies in glory or in torment, as Paradise or as Punishment, is the heaven and hell of the Bible. Not something God did to us, but rather something we did to ourselves. God unconditionally pours out His love on all, WHETHER WE WANT IT OR NOT, whether we are ready for it or not, when we enter the afterlife. This is why the Gospel or "good news" of Jesus Christ should be shared with all people, of all nations, in all tongues. For there is nothing to fear from God's perfect love, since love casts out all fear.

However, it is not totally wrong to understand the after life as "type" of Heaven and Hell. Because from each individual's perspective, it will not be perceived as the same "place", but rather as either torment and darkness you can not escape, or as the paradise you have always longed for. For those judged, they will experience God's presence as eternal darkness and torment. Though it is very important to keep in mind what is the cause of



either of these conditions, or one could reach very wrong conclusions about the nature of God, as they have in western theologies. To misrepresent the nature of a loving God would cause one to conclude that it was God's intention to punish his creation. Indeed, one blasphemes the reputation of the God of the Bible when you make him into an angry vengeful god that punishes His creation. The cause of the torment is the poor choices that we make, not God. If one thinks of these two different "places" as conditions that we choose to be in, rather than "compartments" God puts us in, it would be more accurate.

And it will certainly be "paradise" to finally experience His Divine Love up close and in person for those who seek it. It is all in the perception.

Such is the nature of a loving God. For God is God.

Peter Chopelas