Heaven, Hell, and the Vocabulary of the Afterlife

Paper 4 in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

English has one word for hell. Scripture does not.

At least four distinct terms are folded into that single English word across most translations: the Hebrew *Sheol*, the Greek *Hades*, the Greek *Gehenna*, and the verb *tartaroō*, built on the Greek name Tartarus. Alongside them sit several further descriptions that are not the same as any of those and not the same as each other: outer darkness, the furnace of fire, the abyss, the lake of fire, the second death. Set side by side, these terms turn out to name several different things. One of them names simply the place of the dead in general, with no inherent connection to punishment at all. One names a real valley outside Jerusalem with a specific and horrifying history. One is used only of angels. And several are descriptions rather than place-names, which is a distinction this paper will spend some time on, because losing it is the source of most of the confusion.

English has a comparably loose relationship with "heaven," collapsing at least three distinct realms into one undifferentiated word: God's own throne, the contested region over the earth presently held by rebel authority, and the visible sky where birds fly.

The trouble isn't that these terms are difficult to sort out. It's that Scripture sorts them out plainly, and that English translators have printed "hell" and "heaven" over the top of them since the first English Bibles. The English language didn't lose these distinctions. Translators chose two words and the King James fixed them in the reader's ear, and even the modern versions that restored "Hades" kept "hell" for Gehenna and Tartarus. Those two words on the page are the single biggest reason most readers have never noticed.

One further claim governs everything below. Four of these terms are judgment vocabulary — Gehenna, outer darkness, the lake of fire, and the second death — and not one of the four is used in Scripture as an address, the name of a location on any map. Gehenna is a real valley outside Jerusalem, but Jesus uses its name for what that valley stood for. All four are symbolic or descriptive language for judgment and separation from God. That holds for every group they are applied to, without exception and without a carve-out for anyone. Sheol and Hades are handled differently, because they are not judgment vocabulary at all but the name for where the dead are, and Tartarus is handled differently again, because Scripture says almost nothing about it and this paper will not fill the silence.

The three traditions compared in this paper each teach one general judgment at the end of history, where all who have ever lived stand before Christ together (WCF 33.1; CCC 1038; Wesley, "The Great Assize"). Scripture, however, describes several judgments, and they differ in who stands at each and when it is held (2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 25:31-32; Ezek. 20:34-38; Rev. 20:11-15). Every judgment held before Christ's coming kingdom sorts men who have already been made alive in spirit (Eph. 2:5), because only such men are in a position to enter that kingdom, and what each one

decides is entrance or exclusion, and degree within it, in recompense for works done (2 Cor. 5:10; Luke 19:17-19). Once that kingdom's thousand years are finished, none of that is on the table, and only then are the spiritually dead raised and judged (Rev. 20:5), a scene John records as taking place with God seated on a great white throne (Rev. 20:11-12). Nearly every term sorted below belongs to one of these judgments, and mistaking which one is where most of the trouble starts.

The Mainstream Landscape

Three traditions are compared throughout this project, and on this subject they agree more than they differ. Their shared vocabulary needs defining before their positions can be stated fairly.

The **intermediate state** is where a person is between physically dying and rising again. Every position surveyed here holds that the soul is conscious during it; none teaches soul sleep.

The **final state** is where a person is after the resurrection and the last judgment.

Eternal conscious torment, usually shortened to ECT, is the traditional view that the unsaved exist forever in conscious suffering. It's the majority position in all three traditions.

The Reformed position

The Westminster Confession holds that at death "the souls of the righteous... are received into the highest heavens... and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day." It then adds a sentence that matters more to this paper than any other line it quotes: "besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none" (WCF 32.1).

That is a formal declaration that there are exactly *two* destinations and no further categories. It's the clearest statement anywhere in this project's mainstream sources of the very flattening this paper addresses, since a single English word, "hell," is being made to carry Hades, Gehenna, the abyss, and the lake of fire all at once, and any distinction between them is ruled out by confession rather than by exegesis.

What happens, on this view, to a Christian who dies having lived unfaithfully? Nothing beyond a loss of degree. The Reformed system has no category for a saved person suffering any real adverse outcome after death, because perseverance is treated as the mark of true regeneration. A life of persistent unrepented sin is read backward as evidence the person was never saved, and his destination is the same as that of the unsaved.

The Wesleyan position

Wesley worked the afterlife out in more detail than either of the other two traditions, and the detail runs somewhere the other two don't go.

He held a real intermediate state and declined to call it heaven. In his sermon "Of Hell" he writes that "paradise is only the porch of heaven," the place where "the spirits of just men are made perfect" — a waiting region distinguished from the fullness of joy at God's right hand, which comes later. The righteous dead are in Abraham's bosom, still growing in knowledge and holiness rather than having arrived. The unrighteous dead are held in conscious torment, aware of what is coming but not yet under its final sentence, and Wesley describes their sharpest present suffering as a loss:

they "have lost their place in Abraham's bosom, in the paradise of God," and will one day understand the worth of what they threw away. His account of the general judgment itself he sets out at length in "The Great Assize" (1758).

Three of the distinctions this paper draws are therefore already in Wesley: an intermediate state that is not the final one, a paradise that is not heaven, and a category of judgment described as loss rather than as torment. What he does not do is apply any of it to a saved man.

Wesley also parts company with the Reformed on what decides a man's outcome in the first place. Wesleyan theology treats a life's response to grace as actually deciding the matter rather than ratifying a prior unconditional decree, and Article XII of the Articles of Religion states where the jeopardy lies: after receiving the Holy Ghost, "we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin" — though the same article insists that such a man may by grace "rise again and amend our lives."

According to this tradition, what happens to a Christian who dies having lived unfaithfully? Here the answer can be worse than the Reformed one rather than better, because on this view what is at risk is salvation itself. If the failure was bad enough, the man departed from grace and everything went with it. If it wasn't, he lost nothing. There is no third answer. Wesley's account of the afterlife has more moving parts than the Reformed one, and it still comes down to those same two, because neither system leaves room for the man this paper keeps describing: someone whose salvation was never in doubt, who lost something real all the same, and whose loss runs for an age and then ends.

The Catholic position

Catholic teaching holds that "each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment," resulting immediately in "entrance into the blessedness of heaven — through a purification or immediately — or immediate and everlasting damnation" (CCC 1021-1022).

The distinctive is the third category, purgatory, which Reformed theology explicitly denies exists. Purgatory is not a second chance; it's purification for those who die in God's friendship but "still imperfectly purified" (CCC 1030-31). Catholic teaching also distinguishes mortal from venial sin: mortal sin severs sanctifying grace, and dying in that state without repentance results in hell (CCC 1855-57, 1861).

So what happens to a Catholic who dies having lived badly? It depends entirely on which side of the mortal-venial line his sins fall. Venial sin is addressed in purgatory. Mortal sin, unrepented, is not addressed at all.

This is the closest any mainstream tradition comes to what this paper describes. Both hold that something real can happen after death to a person who is nonetheless saved. They differ on what it is for. Purgatory purifies a person for a heaven he is already certain to enter. What this paper describes is an outcome affecting standing in a coming kingdom, which is a different question entirely.

Two internal debates

That the unsaved suffer consciously forever is usually presented to outsiders as the one point every branch of Christianity has always agreed on. It isn't, and the dissent does not come from the fringe.

Conditional immortality, or annihilationism, holds that the unsaved are finally destroyed rather than kept alive in torment forever. It has been argued by evangelicals of real standing, including John Stott and Edward Fudge, and it's now a permitted minority view in a number of evangelical bodies. Its exegetical case rests largely on the destruction vocabulary this paper examines below.

Universal reconciliation holds that all are eventually restored. Its best-known early form was Origen's teaching of the restoration of all things, which was condemned in the sixth century, in an edict of the emperor Justinian (543) and in anathemas associated with the Second Council of Constantinople (553). It has never been a majority position, but it has always had adherents.

Neither is the position taken here. They are named because both sides argue from the same handful of words this paper is sorting out. Getting those words right matters to everyone in that argument, including a reader who rejects everything else here.

The Word of the Kingdom Position

Heaven is not one place

Scripture's vocabulary for the heavens divides into three realms, and keeping them apart matters for everything that follows.

Paul describes being "caught up to the third heaven" and, in the same account, "caught up into Paradise" (2 Cor. 12:2-4). That language only makes sense if there's a first and a second heaven as well.

The **third heaven** is God's own dwelling and throne. Jesus says not to swear "by heaven, for it is God's throne" (Matt. 5:34), and the psalmist says, "The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all" (Ps. 103:19).

The Old Testament had already graded the heavens long before Paul counted to three, and it did so with a particular construction. Dedicating the temple, Solomon prays, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27; repeated at 2 Chron. 6:18). Moses says the same: "Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it" (Deut. 10:14), where the Hebrew behind "the highest heavens" is *shemei hashamayim*, literally the heaven of heavens. Nehemiah lays the tiers out in order in a single sentence: "You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it" (Neh. 9:6). And the psalmist calls on "you heavens of heavens" to praise, in a line that names them separately from the waters above (Ps. 148:4).

That construction is the ordinary Hebrew way of marking a superlative, the same shape as the holy of holies, the song of songs, and King of kings. What it establishes is exactly what this section needs and no more: Scripture does not treat "heaven" as one undifferentiated place. It speaks of heavens plural, with an innermost and highest among them, named by the same grammar it uses for the

innermost room of the temple. Paul's "third heaven" is not a novelty imported into the text. It is a count applied to a structure the Old Testament had already described.

The "**second heaven"** is the invisible realm immediately over the earth. It is not God's throne. It's the contested seat of what Paul calls "principalities... powers... the rulers of the darkness of this age... spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). Daniel is shown the arrangement directly. A messenger sent to him is withstood twenty-one days by "the prince of the kingdom of Persia," and on leaving is told that "the prince of Greece will come" (Dan. 10:13, 20). Persia was the empire ruling the earth as Daniel wrote, and Greece was the empire that would displace it. So the succession of angelic princes tracks the succession of earthly kingdoms — one power holding a territory in the unseen realm while another holds the same territory in view.

Isaiah shows who sits in that seat, and he shows it the same way Daniel did. The oracle is addressed to "the king of Babylon" (Isa. 14:4), then speaks straight past the man to the one standing behind him: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" (Isa. 14:12). What follows is Satan's ambition in his own words: "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God... I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:13-14). He already held a throne when he said it, one given to him — God says of the same figure in Ezekiel, "I established you" (Ezek. 28:14) — and his rule was over the earth. What he reached for was higher: a throne above the stars of God, which is to say God's own. That one he never got. The one he had been given he still holds, and he holds it from the second heaven, which is why Paul calls him "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2).

The "**first heaven"** is the visible sky, where birds fly "across the face of the firmament of the heavens" (Gen. 1:20) and the stars are seen (Ps. 8:3).

Paul names the whole structure in one breath, and says it awaits reconciliation: "For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers," and God will "reconcile all things to Himself... whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Col. 1:16, 20). The paired terms carry the point. Paul doesn't say heaven and earth and stop; he says visible and invisible, which is the same division stated a second way, and then lists four ranks of authority under it. What he is describing is not scenery. It's a chain of command with occupants on both sides of the line between what can be seen and what cannot. A structure needs reconciling only if part of it is in rebellion, and it is the second heaven that is.

This matters immediately, because "the heavenly calling" the Church is said to possess (Heb. 3:1) is not a calling to the first heaven or the third. It's a calling to the second: the realm currently occupied by rebel authority, whose rule hasn't yet changed hands. What Christ promises the overcomer is authority over nations and a share of His own throne (Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21), which is administrative language for a realm that presently has a different administration.

Fire: what Scripture actually uses it for

Before any specific term is examined, one image runs through all of them and has to be understood on its own, or everything below will look as though it was built to reach a convenient conclusion.

Fire, in Scripture, belongs first to God Himself: "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29; cf. Deut. 4:24). The image describes what He is, and never a place men are sent to or a length of time they

stay there. It is His holiness at work, and what that work accomplishes is decided by what it touches.

It is used of His refining work on His own people: "He is like a refiner's fire... He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver" (Mal. 3:2-3). It is used of the testing of a Christian's faith, "though it is tested by fire" (1 Pet. 1:7), and of the testing of a Christian's works, where "the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is" (1 Cor. 3:13). It is used of the day of the Lord burning like an oven (Mal. 4:1), and of the judgment of nations (Amos 1:4, 7, 10).

Isaiah puts the point more sharply than any of these. He records the terrified question of hypocrites in Zion, "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?" and then answers it: "He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly" (Isa. 33:14-15). The righteous are the ones who dwell with the everlasting burning. So the fire is not a place the wicked are sent to and the righteous escape. One man stands in it and the next is consumed by it, and the difference lies in the men rather than in the fire.

John the Baptist puts the same thing in working terms, and his second sentence explains his first. He announces that the One coming after him "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire," then says what that fire does: "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:11-12).

Two things there govern everything below. The first is that wheat and chaff come off the same stalk, lie on the same floor, and are worked by the same fan. This is not a fire sent to one group and withheld from another. It's one process applied to a single harvest, and what it accomplishes depends on which part of the harvest it meets.

The second is the word "unquenchable." The chaff is burned *up*. It doesn't smolder on forever, because chaff isn't the sort of thing that can. So "unquenchable" is a statement about the fire and not about how long what enters it lasts. And the word John uses is *asbestos* — the same word Mark uses of the fire at Gehenna (Mark 9:43). Before that term is ever applied to a place, it has already been applied to a fire that burns up what is put into it until nothing of it is left.

This is the rule the whole paper applies, and it cuts in one direction only. Fire is a fitting image of judgment for anyone who rejects God or resists His work, saved or unsaved. It is not a special category invented for the unsaved, and it is not a softened metaphor reserved for the saved. It is the same image, doing the same work, wherever it appears.

Death: what the word names

One more term has to be settled before the specific vocabulary can be sorted, because nearly every difficulty below turns on it. English hears "death" as a heart stopping. Scripture means something else, and it says so the first time the word is used.

God's warning to Adam was direct, given before the woman had even been formed: "in the day that you eat of it $$ the tree of the knowledge of good and evil $$ you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Adam ate, and he didn't stop breathing that day. His body went on working for centuries afterward;

Genesis records that "all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years; and he died" (Gen. 5:5). If death meant biological cessation, the warning failed.

What did happen that day is in the next verses. Adam and the woman heard the LORD God walking in the garden, and they hid (Gen. 3:8). God called, "Where are you?" — asked of a man by the God who knew exactly where he was, because something between the two parties had changed and the man could no longer stand in front of Him (Gen. 3:9-10). Death, therefore, is separation from God.

It took all three parts of the man, and took each one differently. The spirit was severed outright. The soul went dark and was corrupted. The body began to decay and fell short of the glory required to stand in God's presence (Rom. 3:23; 1 Cor. 15:43). The covering they sewed for themselves was totally insufficient, so God made tunics of skin and clothed them (Gen. 3:21). That covering came from God rather than from the man, and it cost a life to make. It's Scripture's first picture of a standing given back rather than earned. And like the standing it pictures, it answered one part of what had died that day.

That threefold death is the death every man since has been born holding. Paul states how it travels — "through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men" (Rom. 5:12) — and names it as sin's wage (Rom. 6:23). Note the verb. It *spread*. God pronounced His sentence in Eden on two people who stood in front of Him and heard it (Gen. 3:16-19); no man born afterward stood trial there, and no verdict was handed down on him by name. What he inherited was the condition that sentence produced. So death is not what waits at the end of a man's life. It is what he has been carrying through all of it.

Physical dying is what that condition eventually produces, and what dying does is separate the three parts from one another. Solomon describes the parting: "the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Eccl. 12:7), and James can take it for granted that "the body without the spirit is dead" (Jas. 2:26).

Scripture narrates all three at once in a single death, and it's the death of Christ. From the cross He said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46). Peter preaches at Pentecost that His soul was not left in Hades (Acts 2:27, 31). And His body was taken down, wrapped in linen, and laid in a tomb (Luke 23:53). Spirit to the Father, soul to Hades, body to the grave. Three parts, three destinations, out of one physical, earthly *death*.

Salvation works the same way, one part at a time. A man who believes has had one part of it reversed. His spirit is made alive — "even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5) — and that verdict is closed and never revisited, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). His soul is still being worked out, which is why Peter can speak of a salvation his readers are yet "receiving," namely "the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet. 1:9), and why Paul tells men already saved to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). And his body hasn't been touched at all; it's still groaning, still "eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23). Two-thirds of the death he was born with is still on him, and stays on him until his reckoning at the Judgment Seat (2 Cor. 5:10), and for some men beyond it. A Christian has not finished with death. He has finished with a third of it.

Life is the reverse of it. Not a body that keeps working, but a man in fellowship with God. That is what Adam had in the garden, and what he lost the day he ate.

Sheol and Hades: the unseen place

The most basic confusion this paper addresses is treating *Sheol* (Hebrew) and *Hades* (Greek), two words for the same thing, as synonyms for punishment. They are not.

The Greek word says so itself. *Hades* is formed from the alpha-privative *a-*, meaning "not," joined to *idein*, "to see." The word means the unseen. That's exactly the right name for where a soul goes at death: somewhere we can't see. It is a description of visibility, not of treatment.

The Hebrew word doesn't get there the same way. *Sheol* has no agreed derivation. The two leading proposals take it either from a root meaning to ask or demand, which would make it the grave that never stops asking, or from a root meaning hollow, which would make it simply the hollow place. Standard Hebrew lexicons list the etymology as uncertain. So the tidy word-picture available in Greek isn't available in Hebrew, and nothing in this paper should be built on pretending otherwise.

What settles the question is not the root but the usage, and the usage runs the same direction. Sheol is spoken of as the hidden place. Job asks God to hide him there until wrath passes (Job 14:13), and says that even so, "Sheol is naked before Him, and Destruction has no covering" (Job 26:6), which only means something if Sheol is covered from everyone else. David says that if he made his bed there, God would still be present (Ps. 139:8). Hidden from men, never from God.

And Scripture supplies the equation directly rather than leaving it to be inferred. David wrote, "For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (Ps. 16:10). Peter quotes that verse at Pentecost, and the word that comes out of his mouth for David's *Sheol* is *Hades* (Acts 2:27, 31). An apostle, preaching under the Spirit, treated the two words as naming one thing. That's a firmer basis for the equivalence than any derivation, and it is the basis this paper uses.

Scripture uses both words for the place of departed souls generally, without regard to whether the person was righteous or wicked. Jacob, mourning Joseph, expects to go down to *sheol* in mourning for his son (Gen. 37:35). Job, contemplating death, says that the one who goes down there doesn't come up (Job 7:9). David, fearing not judgment but Saul's sword, says "the sorrows of Sheol surrounded me" (Ps. 18:5), which is a plea for rescue from physical death, not from hell.

And most decisively: Christ's own soul went to Hades at His death. That's the point of the Pentecost quotation just cited, which Peter applies to the Messiah rather than to David (Acts 2:27, 29-31). If Hades were inherently a place of punishment, the sinless Son of God could not have gone there when He died.

What Sheol and Hades name, then, is a holding place for souls awaiting resurrection, and the only way into it is physical dying. Every passage above is speaking of men no longer in their earthly bodies: the body goes into the ground and the soul goes down to Sheol, which is why Jacob, believing Joseph dead, says "I shall go down into the grave $$ sheol $$ to my son in mourning" (Gen. 37:35), and why Peter can say of Christ that "His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:31) — the soul in one place, the body in another. For the redeemed, a place

they are delivered from at the resurrection that precedes the kingdom, when "the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thess. 4:16; cf. 1 Cor. 15:23). For the unredeemed, a place they remain in until the resurrection to the Great White Throne after the end of the Millennial Kingdom, described in Revelation 20:13. And once this last resurrection occurs, Hades has nothing left to hold and is done away with: “Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14).

There is one detail here that demonstrates this paper's whole thesis better than any explanation could. English versions don't render this single Hebrew word consistently. Depending on the Bible version and the passage, the same word becomes "the grave," "hell," or a transliterated "Sheol," and the choice tends to track whether the person in view seemed to the translator to deserve it. The New King James does it inside a single chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah 14:9 reads, "Hell $$ Sheol $$ from beneath is excited about you." Then verses 11 and 15 read "Sheol." Same word, same chapter, same prophet, two English words seven verses apart, one of which carries two thousand years of accumulated freight the Hebrew never carried. No reader working in English alone could detect this.

"You die and go to heaven"

Ask most Christians what happens when a person dies and the answer comes back in two parts: the body goes into the ground, and the invisible part goes to heaven if he was saved and to hell if he wasn't. Then the account stops. Nothing comes after it.

That is not what the words examined above describe. Sheol and Hades name the unseen place where souls are held awaiting resurrection, which is a waiting room and not a destination, and it is where Christ's own soul went.

No confession surveyed above teaches this popular version either. Westminster has the souls of the righteous received into the highest heavens and the souls of the wicked reserved to the judgment of the great day — reserved, which means something is still coming. Catholic teaching has the outcome fixed at death in a particular judgment, with the resurrection and the general judgment still ahead of it. Wesley has paradise as the porch of heaven, a waiting region where the spirits of just men are still being made perfect. Every one of them has a man arriving somewhere and then waiting. What the popular version does is keep the destination and drop the waiting, the resurrection, and the judgment. It is the same flattening this paper has been tracing through the vocabulary, working this time on the sequence.

Nor is 2 Corinthians 5:8 the proof text it's usually made into. Paul writes that he is "well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord," but the passage he writes it in is about longing for a resurrection body. He speaks of an earthly tent being dissolved, of a building from God, of groaning and being burdened, and of desiring "to be clothed upon" rather than found naked (2 Cor. 5:1-4). His subject is the body he wants, not a sentence about destination after death.

The rich man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31 reads like a narrated scene of conscious experience after death, with dialogue in it, and nothing else in Scripture comes close to its length or detail. That's why the passage carries so much of the popular picture. Flames, torment, sight across a divide, a fixed gulf, a plea for relief

refused: those details come from here, and much of what people see in their minds when they hear the word "hell" is built out of them.

So the first question is what kind of passage it is, before anything is decided about what it teaches.

It begins the way the parable before it begins. Luke 16:1 opens, "There was a certain rich man," and introduces the parable of the unjust steward. Luke 16:19 opens with the identical phrase, in the Greek and in English alike: "There was a certain rich man." Nobody disputes that the first is a parable.

That opening is Luke's habit rather than a coincidence. He begins parable after parable with it: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho" (Luke 10:30), "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully" (12:16), "A certain man had a fig tree" (13:6), "A certain man gave a great supper" (14:16), "A certain man had two sons" (15:11), "A certain man planted a vineyard" (20:9). Three of those stand close by — the great supper, the two sons, and the unjust steward — and the two sons is inside the very conversation the rich man and Lazarus belongs to. Verse 19 makes the fourth in that run.

So reading it as a factual report and not a parable means holding that one instance of a formula Luke uses throughout his Gospel, sitting in the middle of a cluster of them, introduces a different kind of writing. That claim needs a reason behind it, and the readings that depend on it seldom offer one — and most don't appear to notice that they need to.

It is the same conversation, with the same audience, about the same subject. Luke 15 opens by naming who is present and why: tax collectors and sinners drawing near to hear Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes complaining about the company He is keeping, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:1-2). Four parables are given afterwards to answer that complaint. Then immediately after those parables, Luke confirms that the audience hasn't changed: "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him" (Luke 16:14). So when the rich man and Lazarus section begins in verse 19, it isn't a new topic introduced after a break. It continues an argument with men who had just sneered at Him over money, and it opens by describing a man clothed in purple and fine linen who fared sumptuously every day.

The one detail that looks out of place points the same direction. Between the Pharisees' derision of verse 14 regarding the parables given, and the introduction of the certain rich man of verse 19, there sits a verse on divorce and remarriage (Luke 16:18) that appears to belong nowhere. Some read it as an interruption, which makes verse 19 look like a fresh start. But read as part of the long indictment being delivered to the men in front of Him — *unfaithfulness*, using the vocabulary of marriage and adultery, something Scripture uses throughout the prophets — it holds the larger sequence together, and verse 19 is read as a continuation rather than a beginning.

The objection about the name has an answer. It is said that this can't be a parable because a character is named, and no other parable names anyone. Scripture uses names representatively as a matter of course: Judah and Ephraim stand for the nation, Jezebel names a pattern of conduct rather than a person in Revelation 2:20, and Jerusalem stands for the whole people in Matthew 23:37. And this account names two men, not one. The second is Abraham, and nobody supposes the story is telling us what Abraham has been up to since he died. His name is doing what it always

does in Jewish speech, standing for the covenant line itself, which is why the rich man appeals to him as "Father Abraham" (Luke 16:24, 30) and why the place of comfort is called Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22). The naming in this passage is representative on the face of it, which is the very practice the objection claims rules out a parable.

Taken together, the rich man and Lazarus is a parable, and its subject is the one Jesus had been pressing on these men for two chapters, and what the majority of the Gospels record: a kingdom is being offered, who chooses to receive it, and who chooses to forfeit it.

On that reading the figures resolve. The rich man stands for Israel's religious leaders, the men who held the spiritual food and should have been feeding the nation, described as clothed and faring well. The beggar at the gate, full of sores, desiring crumbs, stands for those in Israel who had no such provision and who received the message of the kingdom anyway (though not from their leaders but from their King) — the tax collectors and sinners of Luke 15:1, the people the leaders just accused Jesus of receiving. Abraham's bosom signifies close association with Abraham and everything promised to the nation through him. The rich man's position is *separation from it*, described in the vocabulary of death and torment because that is what forfeiture of the offer of the kingdom amounts to. Nothing in the story questions whether he is a son of Abraham. Abraham calls him "Son" and he calls Abraham "Father" (Luke 16:24-25), and neither one disputes the other. What he has lost is not his standing — he was and remains a “saved” individual. His loss was what was on offer. Jesus had already said the same thing elsewhere without a story: "the tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you $$ Pharisees $$" (Matt. 21:31).

The picture isn't a comfortable one for anyone who teaches. Notice what the rich man is never accused of. He doesn't drive Lazarus away. He doesn't refuse him, mock him, or deny that he is there. The rich man eats well inside while a hungry man lies at his gate, and the food never travels the few feet between them.

The same thing can be said of any man who holds the word of the kingdom and keeps it among his own — well fed, well taught, entirely comfortable — while the people who need it live outside on scraps. Cruelty isn't required. All that's required is that the food never reach the gate.

What this does and does not settle. The parable is not describing the geography of the afterlife. It is not describing the lake of fire, which it never mentions. It is not describing the last judgment, which has not occurred at any point in it. And it is not laying out a timeline, which is where nearly every reading of it goes wrong.

To see why, it helps to remember what a parable is for. A parable takes something the hearer already knows and uses it to carry something he doesn't, and the elements of the story are chosen to serve that errand rather than to carry their own literal definition. Nobody reads the wheat and the tares for guidance on weeds, because the field and the seed and the enemy and the harvest are each standing in for something, and a man who came away from it worrying about his crop would have missed the whole of it. The parable eighteen verses earlier makes the same point more bluntly: a steward about to lose his position for wasting his master's goods wastes still more of them to buy himself a welcome elsewhere (Luke 16:1-8). Nobody mistakes it for instruction in handling accounts. So when verse 19 opens on a rich man in purple and a beggar at his gate, the two of them die, and one is carried to Abraham while the other is in torment, the details are doing

what parable details always do. They carry the lesson. They are not a survey of what lies on the other side of dying, and pressing them for one produces a doctrine of the afterlife built out of stage scenery.

There's a further reason the form matters here, and Jesus gave it Himself. When the disciples asked why He taught the crowds this way, He didn't say that stories make a lesson vivid. He said the opposite. "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that 'Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand'" (Luke 8:10). Matthew records the fuller version: "Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt. 13:13), followed by Isaiah on a people whose heart had grown dull, whose ears were hard of hearing, and whose eyes they had closed themselves (Matt. 13:15). To the disciples He said the reverse: blessed are your eyes, for they see (Matt. 13:16).

So a parable is not a plain account with pictures added. It's a form that conceals from one kind of hearer while it discloses to another, and the hearer it conceals from is the man who has already decided against what is being offered. Matthew says that after the rejection Jesus used nothing else with the crowds, that "without a parable He did not speak to them," and that this fulfilled a word about uttering "things kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:34-35). The obscurity was the point.

Which is what makes reading Luke 16 as a straightforward report of the afterlife a misuse of the form. The Pharisees were standing right there deriding Him when He told it (Luke 16:14). To treat the story as a plain description of the next world is to ask a form built to withhold from those men to serve as the clearest map of the unseen in all of Scripture.

What the story is actually about is what the whole conversation has been about since Luke 15:1, kept in context of the greater whole of what Jesus' entire earthly ministry was about. Jesus was offering a kingdom to Israel, some were receiving it and some were refusing it, and the language He used for those two outcomes throughout His ministry was *lost* and *found*, and *life* and *death*. He said it without any story at all in Matthew's Gospel, and the scene He described is the scene this parable stages: "many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:11-12). One man seated with Abraham and another put outside in the dark, and every word of it about who enters the kingdom. That's what the parable's two locations carry. Abraham's bosom stands for *life* and Hades for *death*, and both belong to the age Jesus was offering rather than to the disposition of anyone's body. Abraham's own word for what the beggar has is Isaiah's word for what God does for His people: he "is comforted" (Luke 16:25), and "the LORD has comforted His people, and will have mercy on His afflicted" (Isa. 49:13).

Paradise

One term often attached to that scene needs separating out, because readers routinely treat Abraham's bosom and Paradise as the same thing and Scripture never equates them. The word Paradise does not occur in Luke 16 at all. It appears three times in the whole of Scripture, and the

discipline this paper applies elsewhere applies here too: very little can be built on three occurrences.

The first is spoken to a dying man. He had said, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom," and Jesus answered him regarding Paradise (Luke 23:42-43). What the man expressed was faith about who Jesus was and about a kingdom still to come. What he received was an answer framed in terms of being with Jesus. What cannot be settled from the verse is its timing, because the earliest manuscripts carry no punctuation at all, and where a modern editor places the comma decides whether "today" attaches to the speaking or to the being. This paper takes no position on that, for the same reason it takes none elsewhere: the punctuation is editorial, not apostolic.

The second is Paul's, and it withholds more than it gives. He describes a man caught up to the third heaven, and a man caught up into Paradise who "heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (2 Cor. 12:2-4). Whether the third heaven and Paradise name one place or two is an assumption readers bring rather than a statement Paul makes. And the one thing he does report about the content is that it could not be repeated.

The third is a promise to an overcomer: "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7). That is reward language, addressed to a church, conditioned on overcoming, and attached to the tree of life.

What the three have in common is not geography. Two of them sit squarely in kingdom and reward contexts — a man asking to be remembered when Jesus comes into His kingdom, and an overcomer granted the tree of life — and the third says its content cannot be told. Paradise is associated in Scripture with nearness to the King and with what is granted to the faithful. That is what the occurrences will support, and this paper stops there.

Gehenna: a real valley turned into a description

Where Sheol and Hades are neutral, Gehenna carries real negative force, though not the force usually assumed.

The word transliterates the Hebrew *Ge-Hinnom*, the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, a physical location just outside Jerusalem's walls, and it is its history that matters. This is where Ahaz "burned incense in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and burned his children in the fire" (2 Chron. 28:3), and where, Jeremiah says, the people "built the high places of Tophet... to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire," a thing God says He never commanded and which never came into His heart (Jer. 7:31). It is the place where Israelites passed their own children through fire to Molech.

That is the association Jesus is reaching for, and not a municipal garbage dump. Most readers have been given the dump instead: the valley was Jerusalem's burning garbage heap, so Gehenna means a smoldering dump. The trouble is that no ancient source says so. It appears first in a commentary by Rabbi David Kimhi around A.D. 1200, more than a thousand years after Jesus spoke, and no earlier Jewish writing, no Christian writer of the first several centuries, and no excavation of the valley has produced any trace of it. What the ancient sources do supply is the fire the valley was actually known for. Gehenna carries the site of Israel's most complete abandonment of her own calling: the place where the covenant people destroyed their own children and their own future.

Christ's use of the word bears this out, because He never once sets Gehenna against being saved. He sets it against entering life/entering the kingdom. Matthew records the warning as two sentences, back to back: "It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting $$ aionios, age-lasting $$ fire" (Matt. 18:8), and "It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell $$ Gehenna $$ fire" (Matt. 18:9). The age-lasting fire of the first sentence is the Gehenna fire of the second. Mark gives the same saying with "the kingdom of God" where Matthew has "life": "It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell $$ Gehenna $$ fire" (Mark 9:47). The contrast drawn is entrance into the coming kingdom against exclusion from it.

Mark's next sentence quotes Isaiah: "where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'" (Mark 9:48, citing Isa. 66:24). Isaiah's own scene isn't the one usually assumed. In Isaiah 66 the worshippers go out and look upon the corpses of those who rebelled, in a passage describing the aftermath of judgment on the earth, at the threshold of the age to come. Isaiah doesn't name the place, but Jeremiah had already named it. Of the valley where Israel burned her children, God says the days are coming "when it will no more be called Tophet, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Tophet until there is no room. The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth" (Jer. 7:32-33). A field of corpses outside Jerusalem is what that valley was promised to become. Jesus drew the phrase from a passage set at the beginning of the kingdom, not from one describing a final and separate state.

Gehenna, then, is used as a descriptor for the opposite of kingdom inheritance. It's the name of a real place used as a figure of speech, exactly as one might say a course of action leads to Chernobyl. Nobody hearing that supposes a plane ticket to Ukraine is involved.

Matthew 10:28, and what "destroy" means

One verse in this cluster is regularly treated as decisive, and it repays slow reading: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell $$ Gehenna $$" (Matt. 10:28).

Start with the audience, because it's usually assumed rather than checked. Matthew 10 is the sending out of the Twelve, and the chapter is addressed to them throughout. Luke's parallel makes it unmistakable: "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body" (Luke 12:4). Both contexts are disciples. This is a warning given to Christ's own men, which is exactly what the reading set out here predicts and exactly what the traditional reading has to explain.

Then notice what the verse says about the soul. Men can kill the body and cannot touch the soul. God deals with both together. That's the connection between soul and body stated by Christ in a single sentence, and it is the reason the salvation of the soul and the glorification of the body are one verdict with two effects rather than two separate awards.

Then the word "destroy," which is *apollumi*, and which is where the verse turns. It does not mean annihilate. Luke 15 uses the same verb and its participle three times in one chapter: the *lost* sheep, the *lost* coin, and the son who "was lost and is found." None of the three ceased to exist. All three

were ruined, out of place, and useless to their owner, and all three were recovered. Matthew uses it of wineskins that "perish" when they burst (Matt. 9:17), and Jesus uses it in this very chapter of "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6). John uses it of bread fragments gathered up "that nothing be lost" (John 6:12). The word means ruin, loss, being rendered unfit for purpose. Applied to a soul and a body in Gehenna, it names a real ruin, not an ending.

And notice which part of man is missing from the sentence. Jesus names the soul and the body as what God is able to destroy in Gehenna, and says nothing whatever about the spirit. That silence fits what was set out above about the spirit: it is made alive when a man believes, and its judgment is closed — it cannot be “destroyed.” What *is* named as being at risk is what is still in play.

And the first half of the verse fits the definition set out above. Men can kill the body and cannot kill the soul, which means physical dying separates the parts without ending any of them. Separation, not cessation, from Eden onward.

Outer darkness: a description, not a place-name

"Outer darkness" appears three times, all in Matthew (8:12; 22:13; 25:30), with Luke reducing the same idea to a single word, "thrust out" (Luke 13:28).

The Greek is *to skotos to exōteron*, and the construction doubles the definite article: literally, "the darkness, the outer one," or simply, the darkness outside. That's a description of a location relative to something else. It is not a proper noun, and no English reader would ever guess it from the capitalized, ominous phrase the versions have given us.

Outside of *what* becomes clear from the setting. The clearest picture is the wedding feast (Matt. 22:1-14): a royal banquet held at night, inside a lit hall, with darkness immediately outside the doors. A guest removed from the hall is not deported to a distant country. He is put out of the light, into the adjacent dark, near enough to hear the celebration he has been excluded from.

Applied to the servant of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), the picture is the same, and the identity of the man is what makes the passage hard for every tradition. He's a servant, entrusted with his own master's goods, called to account with the other servants, at the same reckoning, by the same master. He is not an outsider who wandered in.

This is also why outer darkness and Gehenna aren't in conflict with each other. Neither is used as an address. Gehenna borrows a real valley's name for the ruin it stood for, and outer darkness describes standing outside a lit room. They are two descriptions of one thing: exclusion from the light and joy of the kingdom's own celebration.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth

The phrase attaches to several of these scenes and is usually treated as proof that damnation is in view. It occurs seven times, six in Matthew and one in Luke (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28), and not one of them concerns the unsaved.

That's a strong claim and it rests on where the phrase lands. It lands on "the sons of the kingdom" (Matt. 8:12), which there means the Jews to whom the kingdom belonged by promise, now removed from what was theirs. In the parable of the tares that same title means the opposite, the

good seed rather than men put out (Matt. 13:38), so it takes its sense from the scene and names no fixed group. It lands on a servant given charge of his master's household who is caught mistreating his fellow servants (Matt. 24:48-51). It lands on the servant of the talents (Matt. 25:30). It lands on people who protest that they ate and drank in Christ's presence and that He taught in their streets (Luke 13:26-28). These are insiders in every case.

The tares and the dragnet (Matt. 13:42, 50) need one further word, since they're the two occurrences that look least like the rest. The tares are gathered "out of His kingdom" (Matt. 13:41), which is removal from within. When Jesus comes in His kingdom, some are brought into it and others are put out of it, and both descriptions are accurate at the same event. What is named for removal is functional: things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness. And "the sons of the wicked one" (Matt. 13:38) does not mean unsaved individuals, because *huios*, the word rendered "sons" there, denotes one who exhibits a father's character and does his bidding. Jesus applies exactly that vocabulary to His own covenant people. That discourse is addressed to "those Jews who believed Him" (John 8:31), and it is to those same men that He says, "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44). He does the same with Peter, whom He calls blessed and a son of the Father in one breath and Satan and an offense in the next (Matt. 16:17, 23).

One passage outside those seven belongs beside them, and it's the hardest saying in the Gospels for any reading of this vocabulary to place:

> "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matt. 7:21-23)

"I never knew you" is a fair rendering of what Matthew wrote. What is narrow is the English verb. Scripture uses *know* to mean acknowledging and owning, not merely being aware. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth," God says to Israel (Amos 3:2), and He plainly knew that every other nation existed. "The LORD knows the way of the righteous" (Ps. 1:6). "I know My sheep" (John 10:14). Read in Scripture's own usage, the phrase “I never knew you” means refusing to acknowledge someone rather than denying that a man was ever there.

And what it refuses is named in the verse just before it. These men arrive holding prophecy, exorcisms, and many wonders, three times over "in Your name" — and what was asked for was the will of the Father (Matt. 7:21). They present a record of works done in His name at a reckoning about obedience, and He declines their record. The charge He names against them is *anomia*, lawlessness, which is the same word as in the tares, where those who practice it are gathered out of His kingdom (Matt. 13:41).

Where the passage sits in Matthew points the same direction. These verses close the Sermon on the Mount, which had opened three chapters earlier with His disciples coming to Him on the mountain and Jesus sitting down to teach them (Matt. 5:1-2). This is the last thing He says to that audience. And the next thing out of His mouth is the parable of the two builders, where both men hear His words and the only difference between them is what they did with what they heard: one

house stands, one falls, and nothing at all is said about either man perishing (Matt. 7:24-27). The close of the sermon is about what disciples do with what they have been given.

The decisive point, though, is structural, and it belongs to the framework set out at the start of this paper rather than to the passage. Entrance into the kingdom, and exclusion from it, are only ever on the table for the saved, because entrance is held out as a reward for faithfulness, and a reward goes to a servant already in his master's household (Matt. 25:14; 2 Tim. 2:12). The unsaved are not judged before the kingdom at all. They are judged after it ends, at the throne Revelation sets after the thousand years (Rev. 20:7-15). A scene deciding who enters the coming kingdom cannot be sorting men who will not stand before God until that kingdom is over.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth is the language of grief and rage at a loss, a loss concerning the kingdom not received because of unfaithfulness and disobedience. It is not, anywhere in Scripture, the language of the unsaved.

The abyss: a temporary prison

The abyss, sometimes rendered "the bottomless pit," is a different thing from the lake of fire, and Revelation is careful to keep the two apart. How it relates to Hades is a closer question, and Paul's one use of the word bears on it.

The Greek word is built the same way *Hades* is. *Abussos* joins the alpha-privative *a-*, "not," to *bussos*, depth or bottom. It means bottomless, without a floor. "The bottomless pit" is not the translators adding menace; it's what the word says.

The word occurs nine times in the New Testament, and the occupants are more than one. Demons beg Jesus "that He would not command them to go out into the abyss" (Luke 8:31), which means it's a place they can be sent. Revelation has smoke and locusts rising out of it under a king named Abaddon (Rev. 9:1-3, 11), and the beast ascending out of it twice (Rev. 11:7; 17:8). Satan is shown to be its most prominent prisoner (yet future), rather than its only one.

At Christ's return an angel lays hold of Satan, "bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him," adding that "after these things he must be released for a little while" (Rev. 20:1-3). By its own stated terms the abyss is temporary and escapable. Satan comes back out of it. Only afterward, following his final rebellion, is he "cast into the lake of fire and brimstone" (Rev. 20:10), which is a different thing altogether. The two share some imagery, since smoke rises out of the pit "like the smoke of a great furnace" (Rev. 9:2), but only one of them lets anyone back out, and it's the abyss.

Paul's one reference pairs it against heaven, downward against upward, and then says what he means by it: "'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)" (Rom. 10:6-7). He's quoting Moses, and where Moses wrote "Who will go over the sea for us?" (Deut. 30:13), Paul wrote "abyss." For Paul, then, the abyss is where Christ was when He was among the dead, and this paper has already shown where His soul went at His death: to Hades (Acts 2:27). Revelation keeps the abyss apart from the lake of fire; Paul lets it overlap with the realm of the dead.

The lake of fire: the opposite of the river of life

Here is where the fire rule set out above is tested — that fire names God's holiness at work, never a location or a duration — because the lake of fire is the term most commonly exempted from it. Nearly every treatment that reads Gehenna, the outer darkness, and the furnace of fire as descriptive language turns around and reads this one as a location with a temperature.

It should not be exempted. Whatever the lake finally is, John describes it in images, and the images are specific, deliberate, and beautifully constructed.

Read the two images against each other as John gives them. Out of the throne of God and of the Lamb proceeds "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal," feeding the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2). And in the same book, what awaits the finally unreconciled is a *lake* of *fire*.

Elements are inverted. Water is the source of life; fire consumes. A river flows and goes somewhere; a lake is still and enclosed, with no outlet. The river is clear as crystal; the lake burns.

The inversion stops at one point, and that point governs the rest of the image. John names where the river comes from: it proceeds "from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:1). He never puts the lake somewhere else, at a distance from that throne. So the contrast he draws is not between a place where God is and a place where He is not. It is between two men who meet the same God, which is what Isaiah had already said when he asked who could dwell with everlasting burnings and answered that the righteous man does (Isa. 33:14-15). The same throne is a river to the man who can drink from it and a fire to the man with nothing in him that survives the nearness.

Daniel had already seen the throne arranged this way. "His throne was a fiery flame, Its wheels a burning fire; A fiery stream issued And came forth from before Him... The court was seated, And the books were opened." And then: "I watched till the beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given to the burning flame" (Dan. 7:9-11). The fire comes out from before the throne itself, at a court with its books open, and the beast is given to it. John sees the beast cast alive into the lake (Rev. 19:20), and when the court sits at the end, the books are opened again (Rev. 20:12).

"Lake of fire" is not a geographic claim. It's a name built as the deliberate opposite of the river of life, and what it names is death in the sense established above: separation from God rather than cessation of existence.

The fire half of the name carries the sense set out at the start of this paper. God Himself is "a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29), and fire in Scripture doesn't destroy indiscriminately. It consumes what cannot stand in it and leaves standing what can.

Daniel supplies the picture in narrative form. Three men are bound and thrown into a furnace heated seven times hotter than usual. The men who threw them in are killed by the flame. The three walk about in the middle of it unharmed, a fourth figure with them, and when they come out their hair is not singed, their clothes are unaffected, and the smell of fire is not on them (Dan. 3:19-27). One fire, one furnace, one temperature, and two entirely different outcomes decided by who was in it. The only thing the fire burned off the three was what had them bound.

Leviticus shows the same thing at the altar, and among priests. When the priesthood began its service, "fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces" (Lev. 9:24). A chapter later Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's own sons, "offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them" (Lev. 10:1-2). It's the same fire, out of the same presence, at the same altar. It received the one offering and devoured the two men who came near on their own terms, and they were priests when it did.

Two texts show that this fire language, even with "eternal" and "forever" attached, doesn't require a fire that goes on burning.

Jude says Sodom and Gomorrah "are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal $$ age-lasting $$ fire" (Jude 7). Sodom is not burning; it hasn't burned for four thousand years. Peter describes the same event as God "turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes" and "making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly" (2 Pet. 2:6). Ashes are what is left when a fire has *consumed* something and gone out. And Ezekiel, remarkably, records a promise that God will bring back "the captives of Sodom and her daughters" and that they will "return to their former state" (Ezek. 16:53, 55). So "eternal fire" in Jude cannot mean a fire that is still burning.

Isaiah does the same thing with Edom, and he supplies more of Revelation's own vocabulary than the duration phrase alone:

> "Its streams shall be turned into pitch, And its dust into brimstone; Its land shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day; Its smoke shall ascend forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; No one shall pass through it forever and ever." (Isa. 34:9-10)

Brimstone, burning, unquenched night and day, smoke ascending forever, and "forever and ever" at the close. That's the full construction Revelation uses of the finally unreconciled, whose smoke "ascends forever and ever" (Rev. 14:11) — gathered here into two verses about a country whose ground is not on fire and hasn't been for millennia. Isaiah also writes "from generation to generation" inside the same sentence, which has generations still running while the smoke ascends forever. The sentence keeps its own "forever" inside history. If the Isaiah passage is symbolic, and it demonstrably is, then a reader who insists the same construction in Revelation must mean smoke literally rising without end is applying two standards to one construction.

The other half of the name.

Fire is only half of what Revelation says burns in that lake. Of the five times Revelation names the lake, three name brimstone alongside it, and the word carries a history everywhere else in Scripture that bears directly on how it is working here. The Hebrew word appears seven times in the Old Testament; in the New Testament the word occurs only in Luke's reference to Sodom and in Revelation. Outside Revelation it is always one of two things: something God sends down, or the condition ground is left in once He has.

The LORD "rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens" (Gen. 19:24), and Jesus recalls the same event in the same terms: "it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all" (Luke 17:29). Moses describes the ground left behind as

"brimstone, salt, and burning," where nothing is sown and nothing grows (Deut. 29:23). Bildad says of the wicked man that "brimstone is scattered on his dwelling" (Job 18:15). David writes that "fire and brimstone and a burning wind shall be the portion of their cup" (Ps. 11:6). Ezekiel has God raining it down on Gog along with hailstones (Ezek. 38:22).

Rained, scattered, poured into a cup, or left behind as the condition of a ruined land. Nobody in Scripture lives in brimstone. It's an agent of judgment and the state a place is left in afterward, and it is never once a location. Even in Revelation it stays an agent — the lake *burns with* it.

John doesn't name the lake the same way every time. He gives the full phrase three times, with brimstone (Rev. 19:20; 20:10; 21:8), and twice abbreviates it to "the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14-15). The shorter form appears only in the two verses that follow directly on a full statement of it (Rev. 20:14-15), which is how shorthand behaves. Nothing should be built on the abbreviation.

The last of the seven Old Testament occurrences carries more weight than any of the others, because Isaiah puts brimstone in the very valley that gave Gehenna its name:

> "For Tophet was established of old, Yes, for the king it is prepared. He has made it deep and large; Its pyre is fire with much wood; The breath of the LORD, like a stream of brimstone, Kindles it." (Isa. 30:33)

Tophet stood in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, the valley that gave Gehenna its name, and Jeremiah names that same site when he condemns what Israel did there (Jer. 7:31). So Isaiah has put four things into one sentence: that valley, a fire pit made deep and large, a stream of brimstone, and something *prepared* beforehand for a particular rebel. Those four are close to everything a reader carries in his head when he pictures hell. And Isaiah aims all of them at the king of Assyria (Isa. 30:31), a man whose fall came inside history: the angel of the LORD struck his army outside Jerusalem, and he went home to Nineveh, where his own sons killed him (Isa. 37:36-38). If the whole set can describe a judgment that came and went, no piece of it can be what marks a judgment as final.

One occurrence in Revelation itself belongs beside Isaiah's question about who can dwell with everlasting burnings (Isa. 33:14-15). Of the one who worships the beast, John writes that he "shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb" (Rev. 14:10). Not away from Him. In His presence. Isaiah answered that the righteous are the ones who dwell there; John shows what that same nearness does to those who cannot. In both, fire is what proximity to God does to whatever is unable to survive it.

And separation, in Scripture, was never a matter of distance in the first place — Adam hid from God in a garden God was walking in. A man can be in His presence and cut off from Him at the same time. That is the condition the lake names, and it is why the same throne, the one from whose face "the earth and the heaven fled away" (Rev. 20:11), can be described as a river in one chapter and a burning in another without either description being softened.

What Scripture does state outright is who the fire was built for. Jesus specifies it: "the everlasting $$ age-lasting $$ fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). Two things follow, and the second is the one usually missed.

First, it was not made for man. It exists because rebellion entered, and it entered through the devil and his angels. The sin it answers is the sin that put the second heaven in rebellion: a reach for authority above what was delegated (Isa. 14:13-14).

Second, what a thing was prepared for does not exhaust what it applies to. The fire answers a kind of conduct, not a species of creature, and the conduct is the refusal of a creature to stand where God placed him, under His authority. Man is capable of exactly that, which is why man's association with it traces to the same root — a failure to be what man was made to be, a ruler under God (Gen. 1:26-28). And a man already redeemed is not thereby incapable of it. This is why the fire vocabulary runs across both groups in this paper rather than being reserved for one, and why the distinction that matters is not which images apply but what scope and what finality attach to them.

Two fires, or one described twice.

That raises a difficulty. The word behind "everlasting" in Matthew 25:41 is *aionios*, age-lasting, and Matthew has used the phrase before. "The everlasting fire" of Matthew 18:8 is the Gehenna fire of the very next sentence (Matt. 18:9), so the fire of Matthew 25:41 is the one Gehenna pictures. Yet that fire was prepared for the devil, and the devil is later cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10). Either two fires were prepared for one being, or one reality is being described twice.

The word *prepared* carries more than it looks. A thing prepared is a thing made ready ahead of its use, and the reason it needed making ready is stated in the same clause. Rebellion entered, and it entered through the devil and his angels; before that there was nothing for such a fire to answer. What God prepared because of rebellion and disobedience is then, of course, what answers rebellion and disobedience in whoever turns up behaving the same way afterward.

And the fire has never yet held the ones it was prepared for. They aren't in it now. They hold the second heaven, the seat of rule described earlier in this paper, waiting to be displaced by Christ and those who reign with Him — which is why Paul locates a Christian's present struggle there, against "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places," and calls Satan "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 6:12; 2:2). Revelation then gives the sequence from there: war in heaven, with the dragon cast down to the earth and his angels with him (Rev. 12:7-9); the devil bound in the abyss a thousand years and afterward released (Rev. 20:1-3, 7); and only at the end of all of it, the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10). The fire stands ready and unoccupied.

One clarification belongs here, because a nearby passage is often folded into this one. The angels God "cast down to hell $$ Tartarus $$ and delivered into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4) are not the devil's present company. Jude identifies them as angels "who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode" (Jude 6), and both writers place that offense immediately before the flood — a separate group under a separate confinement, taken up later in this paper. Satan's angels are not in chains. They are in office.

That resolves the shape of the difficulty even where it leaves the vocabulary open. There is one thing prepared, not two. It's spoken of as age-lasting where a scene inside the ages is in view, and as running unto the ages of the ages where the end is. One fire doesn't require one length for everyone it meets, either. How long it goes on for a man is set by what is in him, which John the Baptist had already shown: the fire is "unquenchable," and the chaff is still burned up (Matt. 3:12).

For the unfaithful servant the hurt ends with the age it belongs to, as the sections below set out; for the devil it runs unto the ages of the ages (Rev. 20:10). The full linguistic case for *aionios* belongs to the companion paper on that word.

What this paper settles about the lake, and what it does not.

Two questions get run together here and they should be kept apart.

The first is whether "lake of fire" is a place-name, and the answer is settled. It isn't, and it functions the way every other term in this vocabulary functions: as symbolic and descriptive language for judgment and separation from God. Fire names God's holiness at work. Brimstone is an agent of judgment and the ruin left behind after one, never a location. And *limnē*, the noun rendered "lake," names nothing anywhere else in the New Testament but the water Jesus and His disciples fished and crossed (Luke 5:1-2; 8:22-23, 33). The image is assembled out of borrowed parts, and not one of those parts functions as geography anywhere else in the canon.

The second question is what the image finally corresponds to, and this paper holds its answer loosely. One thing in John's account leans toward a reality that is more than image. Those cast in at the end have been raised first: "I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened"; the sea and Death and Hades give up the dead who were in them; and each is judged before anyone not found written in the Book of Life is cast in (Rev. 20:12-15). They go in embodied, as the beast and the false prophet were "cast alive" (Rev. 19:20). Two other things keep it from being a location in this world. The lake also receives Death and Hades, which aren't bodies at all (Rev. 20:14). And it's still receiving the dead after the earth and the heaven have fled from His face (Rev. 20:11, 14-15), so whatever it is, it isn't made of the present creation. The lean here is that it's real, it's met in a raised body, and it's pictured in borrowed images because nothing in this creation is its equal. "Lake" and "fire" appear together only in Revelation, five times across three chapters, and that's thin enough ground that a lean is all this paper will claim.

One thing holds however the open question is answered. The fire meets every kind of man. Jesus warned His own disciples of being "cast into the everlasting $$ age-lasting $$ fire" (Matt. 18:1, 8), and Paul describes a Christian's works going through fire at the reckoning (1 Cor. 3:13-15). What differs is what the fire finds. Revelation promises the overcomer that he "shall not be hurt" by it (Rev. 2:11) and says it has no power over those in the first resurrection (Rev. 20:6). It keeps the language of being cast in for the beast, the false prophet, the devil, Death and Hades, and those not found written in the Book of Life (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14-15). Daniel's furnace is the pattern again: one fire, and what it does depends on what's brought into it (Dan. 3:19-27).

The second death: a second name, not a second dying

"The second death" is peculiar to Revelation, appearing four times (2:11; 20:6; 20:14; 21:8), and almost every difficulty attached to it comes from assuming it names an *event* — a second occasion of dying, undergone by someone who already died once.

It does not. It's a second name for the lake of fire, and Revelation says so.

The decisive verse is the one usually read the other way. "Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Rev. 20:14). The question is what "this" points back to, and

the natural candidate is the nearest noun rather than the action of the sentence. Revelation removes the ambiguity a chapter later, where the same equation is made by simple apposition: those listed "shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, **which is the second death**" (Rev. 21:8). The lake *is* the second death. John supplies the second name himself, and 21:8 settles how 20:14 should be read.

Substitute the one phrase for the other and the remaining occurrences become straightforward rather than puzzling.

To Smyrna: he who overcomes shall not be hurt by the lake of fire (Rev. 2:11). That's a promise attached to a condition, made to a church, and the language of being hurt, rather than of being sentenced, is the language the promise itself chooses. What that injury is, and when it falls, is taken up below.

Of those in the first resurrection: the lake of fire has no power over them (Rev. 20:6). Again a statement that means something only if it has some power over someone who is not among them.

And Revelation 21:8 lists those who have their part in it — a verse that arrives immediately after a promise cast in the language of inheritance and sonship, "He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son" (Rev. 21:7). Promise and warning set as a pair, addressed to the same hearers. This paper notes the pairing and does not rest anything on it.

Then what is the death that gets cast in?

Read Revelation 20:14 slowly and it says something strange. Death is thrown into death. Two questions come out of it and they need separate answers: which death is being thrown into which, and how a thing like death gets thrown anywhere at all.

Take the first. The lake is the second death, so what goes into it is the first, the Adamic death set out earlier in this paper, carried by every man born since Eden, and the one Jesus went into in order to break it: "that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). Paul names its end: "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:26). John describes what is left once it is gone: "There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying" (Rev. 21:4).

Hades goes in beside it, and the pairing isn't incidental. Hades exists because the Adamic death eventually produces physical dying, and physical dying is what puts a soul there. Remove the condition and the holding place has nothing left to hold. The two go in together because the second cannot outlast the first.

Which raises the next question a reader will have. If death itself is destroyed, how can the second death go on? Because the second death is not a dying of any kind. It is neither the Adamic condition a man is born under nor the physical dying that condition eventually produces. It's a name for permanent separation from God, and separation is a state a man remains in rather than an event done to him over and over. Entering it happens once. What continues afterward is the condition. Revelation shows the difference in consecutive verses: fire "came down from God out of heaven and devoured them," an act that's over once it's done (Rev. 20:9), and then the devil is cast into the lake, where "they will be tormented day and night forever and ever," a condition that goes on (Rev. 20:10). Daniel's beast has the same order, slain first and then given to the burning flame (Dan.

7:11). That's how Revelation can describe the lake as running unto the ages of the ages in the same book that says death is finished.

An objection arrives at this point. Revelation 21:4 says there shall be no more death, which might seem to empty the second death along with the first. But John has already shown the order: Death itself is cast into the lake (Rev. 20:14). The first death ends by being thrown into the second, so "no more death" marks the end of the first.

That leaves the other question from the start: how a thing like death gets thrown anywhere. Daniel's furnace, set out earlier in this paper, answers it. One fire, and two opposite outcomes according to what met it. The men who carried the three to the door were killed by it, and the three walked out without the smell of fire on them. The judgment is one thing, and what it does depends on what is brought into it. For Death and Hades, being cast in means abolition, since neither has anything in it that survives. For a man, it means the condition the name describes.

That raises the harder question, and Revelation answers it in the order it narrates events. If the Adamic death is abolished, and every man was born under it, why is anyone still separated afterward? Because by the time it is abolished, it's no longer holding anyone. John's sequence is exact. First "Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works" (Rev. 20:13). Then Death and Hades are cast into the lake (Rev. 20:14). Then, after both of those, "anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:15). The inherited condition is emptied before it is destroyed, and every man in that scene has already been raised out of it and judged on his own account before anything is done with him. Adam's legacy ends for everyone there. What continues for some of them is not Adam's, but their own.

The difference between the two deaths is the difference between a condition a man inherits and a verdict passed on him by name. Genesis tells it exactly that way. Adam stood before God, heard his sentence, and was driven out of the garden (Gen. 3:17-19, 23-24). Every child born after him was born outside it. Their exile is every bit as real as his, but no one ever tried them; they were born there. That's why Scripture handles the first death the way it does, calling it an enemy that will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26) — the way one deals with an enemy, rather than a sentence someone has to serve — and why Christ could enter it and break it from the inside instead of serving it out (Heb. 2:14). The second death works the other way round. Nobody is born into it. A man comes to be in it because a verdict was pronounced on him, at a throne, by name, according to what was written and what was not (Rev. 20:12-15). Destroying the first death does nothing to that verdict, and nothing to what the verdict consigned him to.

So the second death continues after death itself has been abolished, and nothing in this reading requires either the annihilation of anyone or an unending process of dying. Neither is what the phrase describes.

What being hurt by it means, and when it happens

Two of the four occurrences state an exemption, and both attach it to the same thing.

> "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." (Rev. 2:11)"Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years." (Rev. 20:6)

The first ties the exemption to overcoming, and Christ says it to a church. The second ties it to having part in the first resurrection, and in its own context that is said of men beheaded during the Tribulation for their witness and for refusing the beast, who then reign with Christ a thousand years (Rev. 20:4). Different people, and a different moment. What the two statements share is where they anchor the exemption. Neither attaches it to the great white throne, which stands eleven verses further on. Both attach it to a favorable outcome reached before the kingdom begins, rather than to the judgment held after the kingdom ends.

That locates the timing. What remains is the injury itself, and Paul describes it in his account of the reckoning of a Christian's works:

> "Each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." (1 Cor. 3:13-15)

Fire, work revealed for what sort it is, and loss suffered by a man who comes through saved. That is a burning, and it's described as happening to a Christian.

Revelation opens on a scene furnished the same way. John turns toward the voice and sees this:

> "...and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace... and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword." (Rev. 1:13-16)

The portrait is built out of assessment. Eyes like a flame of fire, which see through whatever is placed in front of them. A sword proceeding from the mouth, which is to say a verdict spoken rather than swung. Feet like brass that has already been through the furnace.

Hebrews gathers the same images and states outright what they are for:

> "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." (Heb. 4:12-13)

The sword is the word. The word is what discerns. And the eyes belong to the One an account is rendered to. Revelation supplies the picture; Hebrews supplies the reading of it, in a letter that has already named its own subject as the world to come (Heb. 2:5).

What follows the portrait is a reckoning conducted by Christ Himself. Seven letters open with the same three words, "I know your works" (Rev. 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). Every one of them closes with what He grants the overcomer. And to Thyatira the two halves arrive together: "These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire" (Rev. 2:18), and five verses later, "I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works" (Rev. 2:23).

That the seven letters are the judgment seat itself is a reading we stand on rather than something the text states. A critic will point out that they were dictated for seven assemblies in Asia, and he would be right about that much. He would be wrong to think it settles anything. Scripture regularly says one thing to the men in front of it and another past them, and Isaiah does it in a passage this paper has already leaned on: the oracle is addressed to the king of Babylon, and four verses later it's addressed to the one who said he would ascend into heaven and exalt his throne above the stars of God (Isa. 14:4, 12-14). A real king, and the being behind him, in one oracle. Hosea recounts the exodus as plain history, and Matthew says the words were spoken of Christ (Hos. 11:1; Matt. 2:15). And John labels his own book before any of the letters are written down, calling it "the words of this prophecy" and dividing it into what John had seen, what is, and what would take place after (Rev. 1:3, 19). Letters to real churches, inside a book its author calls prophecy. What John then depicts is works known and stated by Christ, rewards granted by Him to overcomers and withheld from others, and a verdict pronounced by the word out of His own mouth. That's judgment-seat business. And each letter is addressed to one assembly and then sent to all of them, closing every time on what "the Spirit says to the churches."

So the fire does its work at the judgment seat, and the hurt begins there. It begins in the hearing. "You wicked and lazy servant" (Matt. 25:26). "Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant" (Luke 19:22). John warns Christians against exactly this, that they may "not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (1 John 2:28).

And it doesn't end there, because the verdict assigns a man for the age that follows. No second proceeding appears anywhere in view. There is a sentence, and then a thousand years lived under it.

What the loss actually is

For the unsaved the outcome is final, and the finality is stated in the texts rather than assigned by an interpreter. It's settled at the great white throne, where the dead stand and are judged each one according to his works, and anyone not found written in the Book of Life is cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15). Their separation continues into the ages past the kingdom, while God dwells with man on the earth.

For the redeemed, what Scripture describes is the testing and burning of works. That burning is real and its consequences are real. There's a lexical thread here. The verb rendered "suffer loss" in 1 Corinthians 3:15, *zēmioō*, is the same verb Jesus uses when He asks what profit there is if a man gains the world and "loses his own soul" (Matt. 16:26). James supplies the positive counterpart, describing the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way as saving "a soul from death" (Jas. 5:20).

The question "where does such a person go?" is the wrong question, and this paper has spent its length showing why: none of these terms is used as an address. Ask instead what condition the person is in, and the answer is available.

He does not rule. That's the whole of it, and everything else follows from it. Reigning in the coming age is promised to overcomers and to no one else. The men of Revelation 20:4 reign because they kept their witness and refused the beast at the cost of their lives. Power over the nations is

promised to the one who "overcomes, and keeps My works until the end" (Rev. 2:26); a share in Christ's own throne is granted to him who overcomes (Rev. 3:21); and Paul states the condition without ornament: "If we endure, we shall also reign with Him" (2 Tim. 2:12).

In that age Israel rules on the earth and the Church rules in the heavens. A redeemed man who does not rule is therefore not somewhere else. He is among the ruled. He lives in the kingdom he could have governed, under the authority of those who did what he did not.

He is also not whole. The three parts this paper has kept distinct don't arrive at that kingdom in the same condition.

His spirit is alive and was never at risk. That was settled the moment he believed, and nothing in the reckoning reopened it. His soul he does not have: the salvation of the soul, the life belonging to that age, was the thing on the table, and he forfeited it. And there is no redemption of the body and no covering of glory, because soul and body do not travel separately — one verdict with two effects rather than two separate awards.

So he spends the kingdom divided against himself, spirit against soul and body, through the one age in which everything he was made for is being handed out around him. That is the condition, and it isn't a smaller portion of what the overcomers received.

And the sharper half of the loss is not administrative. It's being outside the presence he could have been inside. The servant who is put out is put out of his master's joy, having heard the words "Enter into the joy of your lord" spoken to someone else in his hearing (Matt. 25:21, 30). The guest is put out of a lit hall into the dark immediately beyond its doors, near enough to hear what he is no longer part of (Matt. 22:13). That is what the darkness outside the light means: not a location, but exclusion from the glory and the nearness that were held out to him and that he watched others receive.

This is grievous, and the New Testament writers plainly meant it to be felt as such. Paul disciplined his body so as not to be disqualified after preaching to others (1 Cor. 9:27). He knew "the terror of the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:11). None of them treated this as a minor adjustment to an otherwise identical outcome.

And after that age

The loss described above comes to an end, and what ends it is the close of the age it belongs to.

Scripture supplies the measure for the days it counts. Peter gives it while answering scoffers about the timing of Christ's coming: "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). Six days of restoration work and a seventh of rest, at that rate, is the frame the whole story sits inside. But the frame was built for a ruined earth and a ruined man, and by the close of the seventh day both are finished. The measure governs seven days and stops there.

Peter names what comes next without measuring it. He calls it "the day of God," and says that those looking for it look also for "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:12-13). By simple count it's an eighth day. How long it runs isn't stated anywhere.

What Scripture does say about an eighth day, it says in the flesh. A male child was circumcised on the eighth day (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3), and Jesus was: "when eight days were completed for the

circumcision of the Child" (Luke 2:21). The flesh is cut away on the eighth day, and it's cut away at the place of fruit-bearing. Paul names the antitype without ambiguity — "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11).

The eighth day answers the type in full. The devil is finished (Rev. 20:10). "There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). "And there shall be no more curse" (Rev. 22:3). Everything the flesh stood for is cut off, and the throne of God and of the Lamb is one throne on a new earth where He dwells with men.

Paul states the same transition without the type: "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death" — closing on the purpose of the whole of it, "that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:24-26, 28).

That last enemy is what brings the loss to an end. The man in view is the Christian who was found unfaithful at the Judgment Seat and spent the thousand years ruled over rather than ruling. What is still on him is Adamic: two-thirds of the death he was born under, his soul and his body, neither of them yet answered. And that's exactly what Revelation throws into the lake at the close of the kingdom, Death itself, cast in and finished (Rev. 20:14). The condition goes in. The man does not. Death is separation, and when the death he inherited is destroyed there's nothing left for that separation to stand on. So the life of the soul is picked up again, and the man who spent the kingdom divided against himself is no longer cut off from God in any part of him, unto the ages that follow. What becomes of his body then, Scripture doesn't say.

What he does not get back is the seventh day. The co-heir's place beside Christ through the thousand years, and the glory required to stand in it, belonged to an age that has closed, and a thing forfeited inside a bounded age is not handed back when the age ends. It stops existing to be forfeited. He recovers his life; the day he lost doesn't come around again. Confusing those two turns the thousand years into a delay rather than a loss, and it was a loss.

Past that point the account thins out, and the last thing said here is a presumption rather than a claim. Man was made to rule (Gen. 1:26-28), and he rules through the seventh day to bring order and restoration to all things. Nothing indicates that he stops. Of what follows, John writes, "And they shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 22:5), where "forever and ever" renders *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, unto the ages of the ages — the same age-vocabulary running on past the last day Scripture measures. The verse says that reigning continues. It does not say who is numbered in it. That God dwells with man on the earth, that man rules with Him unto those ages, and that every one of the redeemed is there, whole in spirit and soul and body, is what this paper presumes, and presume is the right word for it.

Tartarus: angels only, and left where Scripture leaves it

One further term deserves mention for completeness, though it plays no role in the human afterlife.

Tartarus appears once, as a verb rather than a place-name, describing what God did to the angels who sinned: He "cast them down to hell $$ Tartarus $$ and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4). The verb is *tartaroō*. Peter's subjects are angels; the surrounding verses set them alongside the flood and Sodom as examples of judgment.

Jude describes the same group as angels "who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode," reserved "in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day" (Jude 6). Peter elsewhere mentions "spirits in prison" who were disobedient in the days of Noah (1 Pet. 3:19-20).

Scripture does not say what *tartaroō* is. It does, however, say a good deal about which angels these are and what they did, and the pieces converge closely enough to be set out — as an inference drawn from several passages rather than as a statement any one of them makes.

Peter gives a sequence. Angels who sinned, cast down and reserved for judgment; then "the ancient world," not spared, with Noah saved and the flood brought "on the world of the ungodly"; then Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Pet. 2:4-6). The angels' offense is placed immediately before the flood. His other letter dates the same imprisoned spirits to the identical period: they "were disobedient... in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared" (1 Pet. 3:19-20).

Jude then says what kind of offense it was, and this is the part usually read past. Having described angels who left their own abode, he continues: "as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh" (Jude 7). The comparison is the point. Jude likens the angels' transgression to Sodom's, and names Sodom's as sexual and as a pursuit of *strange flesh* — flesh of another kind than one's own.

Genesis supplies the event both writers are pointing at. "The sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose," and "there were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them" (Gen. 6:2, 4). The phrase "sons of God" everywhere else in the Old Testament denotes angels rather than men. Job opens with "a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them" (Job 1:6; repeated at 2:1), and God asks Job where he was at the founding of the earth, "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). Men aren't in view in either scene. Angels leaving their proper domain, going after flesh not their own, immediately before the flood, is what all three passages describe when read together — and Genesis notes that the offspring appeared "also afterward," which is why the spies sent into Canaan generations later come back saying, "There we saw the giants... and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight" (Num. 13:33).

Three objections come up against this reading. Some read "sons of God" as the godly line of Seth and "daughters of men" as the line of Cain. That reading is available in Genesis alone, but it doesn't account for Jude's comparison to Sodom or for his phrase about strange flesh, since a marriage between two lines of humanity is not flesh of another kind. Others cite Jesus saying that in the resurrection people are "like angels of God in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). The qualifier carries the answer: what is said is of angels *in heaven*, and the angels in view here are precisely the ones who

didn't stay there. A third group uses one of these passages for something else entirely, taking Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison as evidence that the dead are evangelized after death, and pairing it with "the gospel was preached also to those who are dead" (1 Pet. 4:6). The verbs differ. In 3:19 it is *kēryssō*, to herald, which announces an outcome rather than offering terms, and what had just been settled was the cross. In 4:6 it is *euangelizō*, and the men there had the gospel preached to them while they lived and are dead now. The spirits of 3:19 are the angels of 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, dated by Peter himself to Noah's days, and no verse anywhere offers an angel the gospel.

None of this explains what *tartaroō* is. It explains why this particular group is confined separately and awaiting a judgment still future, which is a different question and the only one the texts answer. The term itself concerns angels, does not concern people, and is described nowhere. This paper is content to leave it there — one more distinct reality quietly absorbed into the single English word "hell."

Translation Bias

The pattern documented above is the most concrete instance available anywhere in this project of a broader principle: translations are never fully neutral.

The introductory paper in this series establishes that concretely through the King James translators' own written instructions, where Rule 3 mandated retaining "church" rather than "congregation," defending a specific ecclesiology by royal command. "Hell" flattening Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and *tartaroō* into one English word is a different and in some ways more consequential case, because it doesn't require anyone's deliberate agenda to explain it. Centuries of translation tradition, each version following its predecessor out of familiarity rather than re-examining the underlying words, produce the same flattening regardless of intent.

The Sheol data above shows how thoroughly it operates even in a careful, formally equivalent version. One Hebrew word, rendered several different ways, two of them inside the same chapter of Isaiah. Whether the cause in any given case was deliberate or simply inertia, the result for the English reader is identical: several different realities, read as one.

Where They Align

Set the position back alongside the three traditions — Reformed/Calvinist, Wesleyan/Arminian, and Catholic — and the common ground runs wider than the disagreements suggest.

- All three traditions hold that the soul continues to exist between death and resurrection, and so does this paper: physical dying separates the parts of a man without ending any of them (Matt. 10:28; Acts 2:27). The traditions go further and affirm that the soul is conscious there. Scripture offers no text that settles that question either way, and nothing in the reading of Sheol and Hades above depends on it.
- All three affirm that there is a real, final, and irreversible outcome for those who die outside of Christ. The disagreement in this paper is over what the terms describing that outcome are doing, not over whether it is real.
- All three affirm that Scripture's language about judgment is meant to be taken with full seriousness, and none treats it as decorative.

Where They Diverge, and Why

One hell, or several distinct realities

Every specific disagreement in this paper divides on one question: does "hell" name one thing, or several? The Reformed give the most explicit answer, because their divines wrote it into a confession, declaring that beyond two destinations for the separated soul, "the Scripture acknowledgeth none" (WCF 32.1).

The reading taken here is that Scripture's own vocabulary resists exactly this consolidation. Sheol and Hades name an unseen holding place rather than a punishment. Gehenna and outer darkness are descriptions of exclusion from kingdom inheritance. The abyss is a temporary prison, and Satan is its most prominent occupant rather than its only one. The lake of fire is a constructed antithesis to the source of life. Tartarus concerns angels. Those are not two categories, and they are not interchangeable.

Symbol or geography

They also disagree about what kind of language they're reading. Mainstream readings generally treat the lake of fire and its associated imagery as descriptions of an actual location, however qualified. The reading here takes every term in this vocabulary as a real judgment described in images, and does so consistently in every direction.

Consistency matters here because so many writers fail to keep it. They read Gehenna and outer darkness as figures, and then turn around and treat the lake of fire as a literal location. Throughout Scripture fire names God's holiness at work, and the reading here doesn't change the rules at the last chapter. Whatever reality stands behind the images is the same reality for everyone it meets.

Does anything after death ever apply to a Christian

Here the disagreement bites hardest, because it decides what a Christian has to fear. All three traditions read the outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth as final rather than bounded by an age, and that's the sharpest point of disagreement in this paper. Every mainstream tradition surveyed here either reads the unfaithful servant of Matthew 25:30, cast into the darkness outside with weeping and gnashing of teeth, as an unsaved person whose profession was never real, or declines to draw any conclusion about a Christian from him.

The reading here takes the parable at face value. The man is a servant of the master, entrusted with the master's own goods, summoned to the same reckoning as the servants who were commended. His loss is real and painful, and it concerns the kingdom and the salvation of his soul, never the standing settled the day he believed. Catholic teaching, alone among the three, has a category for something real happening after death to a saved person, though it puts that category to a different use.

Answering the Objections

Seven objections deserve direct answers.

"This is selective literalism"

The charge. The method is transparently convenient. Passages that sound severe are read as figures when they might apply to Christians, and read literally when they apply to the unsaved. The conclusion was reached first and the hermeneutic was built to protect it.

The answer. This is the most serious charge in the paper, and it's one that writers in this general position have often deserved. The usual pattern is to read Gehenna and outer darkness as figures and then insist the lake of fire is a literal location, which is precisely the asymmetry described. No such exemption is claimed here, and refusing it costs this paper something rather than gaining it anything, since it gives up the one claim most readers hold with the most certainty.

This paper applies one rule everywhere, and states it in advance. Fire names God's holiness at work, and on a man who resists Him that work is judgment (Heb. 12:29; Mal. 3:2-3; 1 Cor. 3:13; 1 Pet. 1:7). Every fire-and-darkness term in this vocabulary is therefore read the same way for everyone it is applied to, in every context: as a picture of a real judgment, never as an address. Sheol and Hades are read as a condition stated outright rather than pictured, because they are not judgment vocabulary and Christ Himself was there. Tartarus is left unexplained, because the evidence is one verse.

A reader can hold that rule against every section here. It holds from the other side as well: the dead are raised before they stand at either throne (1 Thess. 4:16; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:12-13), so if the lake is more than image for the unsaved, the fire at the Judgment Seat is more than image for the Christian. It is never bent for one group and enforced on another.

"Then nothing is really at stake"

The charge. If it's all symbolic, the warnings have been emptied. Symbols don't hurt anyone.

The answer. A symbol names something. The question is what.

Consider what these particular symbols are built out of. A valley where a nation burned its own children. Standing outside a lit hall while a celebration carries on within it. A still lake of fire set against a river flowing from the throne of God. Scripture didn't reach for these images to soften anything. It reached for them because what they name is hard to look at.

And the thing named is not a mood. It's exclusion from the purpose for which man was made (Gen. 1:26-28; Heb. 2:5-8), grief and rage at an irreversible loss, and for the unreconciled, final separation from the source of life. Nobody who has understood that has been comforted by learning it is not a geological feature.

"The rich man was in torment, so Hades is punishment"

The charge. Luke 16 says the rich man was in torments in Hades. Whatever the etymology of the word, the passage settles its meaning.

The answer. This paper reads Luke 16 as a parable, for the reasons set out above: it opens with the same words as the acknowledged parable eighteen verses earlier, and it continues an argument with an audience Luke names twice. Its subject is who receives what was being offered to Israel and who forfeits it, which is what Jesus had been pressing on those men since Luke 15:1, and what the

Gospels press throughout. Its details are there to carry that lesson rather than to describe where the dead are kept.

But the objection can be answered without that reading. Suppose the account is a straight report. It still won't do what this objection needs.

Christ's own soul was in Hades (Acts 2:27, 31). A place the sinless Son of God went to when He died is not itself a punishment, whatever a man in it may be undergoing. What the word names is where the dead are, and what any one of them is experiencing there is a separate question the word does not answer.

Luke also says less here than he is usually made to say. He puts the rich man in Hades, in torment, and puts the beggar in Abraham's bosom, and never states how the two are related. Readers routinely assume that Abraham's bosom is a compartment of Hades, but that's an inference drawn from the scene rather than anything the scene says, and this paper has no need of it. Hades itself is emptied and discarded at the end (Rev. 20:13-14).

"'Forever and ever' means forever and ever"

The charge. Revelation says the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, and that they have no rest day or night (Rev. 14:11), and that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet "will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). No amount of symbolism removes the duration.

The answer. The full linguistic case belongs to the companion paper on *aion* and *aionios*, and this paper won't duplicate it. What belongs here is that Scripture uses the same pictures, smoke rising and fire unquenched night and day, of judgments whose fire went out long ago..

Isaiah's oracle against Edom, set out earlier in this paper, carries the whole of it: brimstone, burning, unquenched night and day, smoke ascending forever, and "forever and ever" at the close (Isa. 34:9-10). Edom does not smoke. Jude says Sodom suffers "the vengeance of eternal $$ age-lasting $$ fire" (Jude 7), and Sodom is ash, and Ezekiel records a promise to restore her (Ezek. 16:53, 55).

So the burning describes the settled and irreversible character of a judgment, not a fire still literally alight. The duration is a separate matter, and Revelation states it in a phrase Isaiah’s Hebrew doesn’t have: *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, unto the ages of the ages (Rev. 20:10), Scripture’s own way of speaking of what runs on past the last age it measures. This paper doesn’t take that duration away. What the charge can’t do is turn it into unending combustion.

"Matthew 25:41 and 25:46 sit three verses apart"

The charge. In one scene Jesus sends the goats into "the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41) and then says they "will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). Lake-of-fire vocabulary and eternal punishment, in one passage, with a symmetry that ties the punishment's duration to the life's.

The answer. Start with the words themselves, because the objection is built on an English rendering rather than on what Matthew wrote.

"Everlasting" in verse 41 and "everlasting" and "eternal" in verse 46 are one Greek word, *aionios*, and *aionios* is the adjective formed from *aion*, an age. It means age-lasting, pertaining to an age. Three different English words in the same passage translate a single Greek word, and all three carry into English a sense of unending duration that the Greek word does not itself supply. That is the same flattening this paper has been documenting throughout, performed on a different word.

Then notice what the scene is about, which settles which age is meant. The Son of Man comes in His glory and gathers "all the nations" before Him (Matt. 25:31-32), placing this at the end of the Tribulation and before the kingdom. The criterion is treatment of "these My brethren" (Matt. 25:40). And the King's words to those on His right are inheritance vocabulary: "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34), which is what is said to those already in a family.

What is being decided is entrance into the coming kingdom, and that kingdom is bounded by an age. So the recompense on both sides of verse 46 is age-lasting because the age it belongs to is. The symmetry the objection presses is real, and it's exactly what this reading predicts: one word, one age, both outcomes measured by it. The verse ties the two durations together, and this reading keeps them tied. What it declines to do is import into both a length neither word states.

The two verses then relate straightforwardly. Verse 41 names what the fire was made for, which is the devil and his angels, and Jesus says so in the same clause. Verse 46 names what the goats themselves go away into. The word for punishment there is *kolasis*, whose root carries the sense of pruning or checking rather than pure retribution, a distinction Greek writers drew deliberately: Aristotle separates *kolasis*, which is inflicted for the sake of the one undergoing it, from *timōria*, which is inflicted for the satisfaction of the one imposing it. Matthew had the second word available and did not use it.

One further detail belongs here, before a reader with any Greek raises it on his own. The word rendered "into" in "into the everlasting $$ age-lasting $$ fire" is *eis*, the ordinary preposition of motion toward, and it carries nothing special in that clause. It occurs three times in the same scene: *eis to pyr to aiōnion* in verse 41, then *eis kolasin aiōnion* and *eis zōēn aiōnion* five verses later. Nobody reads the third of those spatially. It's also the preposition Jesus uses for entering into the kingdom. So *eis* cannot be made to prove that the fire is a place without proving the same of the life set opposite it in the very same sentence.

"Revelation 21:8's list is obviously the unsaved"

The charge. Cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars. Reading that list as Christians is beyond strained.

The answer. Two things, and the first concedes more than the objection expects.

No claim is made above that the list describes Christians. What is claimed is narrower: the verse arrives as the second half of a pair whose first half is a promise about sonship and inheritance made to overcomers (Rev. 21:7), and promise-and-warning pairs are normally addressed to one audience. That observation is offered and nothing is built on it. If the verse describes the unsaved and only the unsaved, nothing in this paper changes, because its case rests on Revelation 2:11 and 20:6. The first is said to a church and ties the exemption to overcoming. The second ties it to having part in

the first resurrection, and says of those men that they reign with Christ a thousand years. Neither one is describing men who stand at the great white throne.

The second thing is that the objection's own premise deserves testing, because Paul writes lists like this one to churches, and when he does he attaches kingdom vocabulary to them rather than salvation vocabulary.

To the Corinthians: "the unrighteous will not **inherit** the kingdom of God," followed by a list — the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, extortioners — and then, in the same breath, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Paul says the list once described the people he's writing to, and then says what they now are. He is not sorting his readers into saved and lost. Washed, sanctified and justified is the standing these men are in, and Paul treats that standing as something to be kept up rather than as a transaction now safely behind them. And he doesn't stop at verse 11; he goes straight into commands, telling them to flee sexual immorality because the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and is not their own (1 Cor. 6:18-20). He puts it to the Thessalonians as a standing obligation in the same terms: "this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thess. 4:3). And in his next letter he counts himself in with these same Corinthians: "let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). None of that is written to men whose case is closed. Every behavior on the list is one a Christian can fall back into, which is exactly why Paul names them to Christians, and what falling back costs is the thing he opened the paragraph with: the inheritance.

To the Galatians, the same structure: the works of the flesh listed at length, closing with a warning Paul says he has given before, "that those who practice such things will not **inherit** the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19-21). The letter is addressed to brethren, the passage sits inside an argument about walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 25), and Paul has already set out the order for these same readers: slave, then son, then heir, with the inheritance at the end of that line (Gal. 4:7).

Both times the word is *inherit*. An inheritance is what an heir receives; it isn't what makes him an heir. So a list of grave sins attached to kingdom language is not, by itself, evidence that the unsaved are in view — Paul twice writes exactly such a list to Christians. That doesn't settle Revelation 21:8, and this paper doesn't claim it does. It removes the objection's assumption that the list settles it.

"You have no historical precedent for this"

The charge. No tradition, in any century, has read this vocabulary the way this paper does.

The answer. The specific combination set out here is not one this paper claims to find fully assembled in any earlier writer.

But the individual pieces aren't novel. That Sheol and Hades name the state of the dead rather than punishment is standard in modern lexicography and reference works, not a fringe claim. That "hell" translates four different words is uncontested. That the fire imagery of judgment is symbolic rather than physical has been held by writers across the traditions. Calvin himself, in the Reformed tradition's founding systematic work, says Scripture represents the torments of the lost figuratively, through physical things: darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, unquenchable fire, and the

undying worm (*Institutes* 3.25.12). That Gehenna refers to a real valley with a real history is in every reference work.

What is distinctive is the sorting: which terms attach to which group, at which time. That sorting stands or falls on the texts examined above, and it should be tested against them rather than against a census of who has said it before. Whether a reading is old is a different question from whether it's right, and the introductory paper in this series sets out at length why the second question governs.

Why It Matters — Downstream Effects

Sorting this vocabulary reaches well past this paper.

- **This paper supplies vocabulary the rest of the series has been assuming.** The teaching of a conditional soul-and-body reward evaluated at the Judgment Seat requires there to be real, scripturally named consequences that are not identical to losing one's salvation. Gehenna, the darkness outside, and the furnace of fire are those consequences, and this is where they are named and sourced.
- **It removes an inconsistency that would otherwise sink the whole framework.** A man who reads severe language as a figure when it suits him and as a fact when it suits him can be dismissed without further argument. Applying one rule in every direction is what makes the rest of the series answerable rather than merely assertable.
- **It puts a boundary on the loss, and the boundary is doctrine rather than comfort.** A reader who is told that a Christian can forfeit something real at the Judgment Seat will immediately ask how long the forfeiture runs. It runs the length of the age it was forfeited in, which is the thousand years of the kingdom, and that age closes on its own terms. What matters is what happens at its close. The first death, the Adamic condition every man is born under, is destroyed there, and what the Christian still carried of it goes with it. Without that boundary the doctrine collapses into a second hell for the saved, which is neither what Scripture describes nor what this series has ever claimed.
- **It opens the question of duration.** The treatment of "forever" above is a preview of the companion paper on *aion* and *aionios*, which takes up the vocabulary of duration at full length.
- **It changes how these passages get preached.** A warning aimed at Christ's own servants about the loss of what they were made for is a different sermon from a warning aimed at strangers about a location. The New Testament gives the first kind far more often than the second, and the English word "hell" has hidden that for centuries.

Conclusion

"Hell" is not a word Scripture uses. It is a translator's word, standing in for several distinct realities: an unseen holding place for the dead in general, named in Greek for the simple fact that we cannot see it; a real valley outside Jerusalem with an unspeakable history, used as a figure for the opposite of kingdom inheritance; a temporary and escapable prison, holding more than one fallen being; a term used once, of angels, about which Scripture says almost nothing; and a constructed image of a still lake of fire, set as the deliberate opposite of a river of living water flowing from the throne of God.

"Heaven" fares no better, doing the work of three realms under one flattened English roof: God's own throne, the contested seat of rebel authority over the earth, and the sky where birds fly.

None of the judgment terms is used as a destination on a map, not even the one borrowed from a real valley. All of them describe what it is to be separated from God, in language chosen to be unbearable to think about, and the same language is used of everyone it applies to. That consistency is not a softening. It is what makes the warnings answerable to each other instead of to our assumptions.

What differs between the groups the language is used of is not the imagery but the scope. For one it names a real and grievous loss inside a bounded age, ending when death itself ends. For the other it names a separation with nothing after it to bound it. The words are the same words. The difference is how long, and Scripture rather than an interpreter is what sets that.

Untangling the two English words is not academic pedantry. It is the necessary first step before anything else this project teaches about reward, judgment, and the coming kingdom can be followed at all.

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