

Chapter 20

View of Some Forefathers

When trying to explain the salvation of all mankind to those who never heard of it before, it is not unusual to get looks that, if they were verbalized, would go something like this: "Where did you get this? I have never heard this before. My pastor and other great teachers have never taught this. Who are you to challenge all these great men of God? Is this some new teaching?" However, there are others who cite one verse that, to them, refutes this tenet of Scripture and walk away holding to their belief that God is going to toast most of mankind forever and ever.

It is quite understandable that some, perhaps many, would react this way. After all, the tradition of men is a mighty powerful influence, not to forget the power of the systematizing of the deception.

What is presented in this book has not been pulled out of thin air as if no one else holds to it. The fact of the matter is that there are many who see it this way, perhaps not in every detail presented but, at least, generally speaking.

If some of the church forefathers believed in the salvation of all mankind, wouldn't this add some weight to what has been presented in this book?

When it comes to God's judgment of man, some of the early church forefathers did not attempt to present a systematic theology of the subject. Their primary focus was upon the Person of our Lord Jesus as revealed in the law and prophets and what He accomplished through His death and resurrection. In fact, the apostles were mostly focused on Christ who was raised from the dead and is now glorified.

Reading the Bible in this light reveals that the writers of the New Testament did not fully explain all that they believed or how it all fits together, as if they expected those reading their epistles to understand the background material. Whether they did or not, did not seem to concern the apostles as long as Jesus was front and center.

The result is that after 2,000 years, the ecclesia is still trying to figure out the tenets of Scripture. But again, perhaps, the Holy Spirit is beginning to restore some truths that have been lost.

Now, there is some evidence of how the early ecclesia, starting in the second century, viewed the matter of the judgment of all mankind. One of the keys to understanding what they believed is discovered in their use of the word *eonian* as presented in Chapter 1.

With this in mind, let us consider the words of some church forefathers.

Irenaeus of Lyons, Gaul (120-202 AD)

Irenaeus was a church leader from Lyons who was persecuted and died at the hands of the Roman Emperor Severus. Thousands of fellow Christians died during this time, as well. He wrote five books and often cited *eonian* judgment.

"For He must reign till He hath put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For in the times of the kingdom, the righteous man who is upon the earth shall then forget to die. But when He saith, All things shall be subdued unto Him, it is manifest that He is excepted who did put all things under Him. And when all things shall be subdued unto Him, then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him who put all things under Him, that **God may be all in all.**

"John, therefore, did distinctly foresee the first 'resurrection of the just,' and the inheritance in the kingdom of the earth; and what the prophets have prophesied concerning it harmonize [with his vision]. For the Lord also taught these things, when He promised that He would have the mixed cup new with His disciples in the kingdom. **The apostle, too, has confessed that the creation shall be free from the bondage of corruption, [so as to pass] into the liberty of the sons of God.** And in all these things, and by them all, the same God the Father is manifested, who fashioned man, and gave promise of the inheritance of the earth to the fathers, who brought it (the creature) forth [from bondage] at the resurrection of the just, and fulfills the promises for the kingdom of His Son...."

"Christ, who was called the **Son of God before the ages**, was manifested in the fullness of time, in order that He might cleanse us through His blood, who were under the power of sin, presenting us as pure sons to His Father, if we yield ourselves obediently to the chastisement of the Spirit. **And in the end of time He shall come to do away with all evil, and to reconcile all things, in order that there may be an end of all impurities.**"

Clement of Alexandria (150-213 AD)

Clement was a Greek born in Athens. From 190-203 AD, he was a leader of the Church in Alexandria, Egypt. He too lived during the persecution of the Roman Emperor, Severus, but he fled the persecution and taught in Antioch and Palestine.

"God does not wreak vengeance, for vengeance is to return evil for evil, and God punishes only with an eye to the good."

"Wherefore also **all men are His**; some through knowledge, and others not yet so ... **For He is the Savior; not the Saviour of some, and of others not** ... Nor can He who is the Lord of All (and serves above all the will of the Good and Almighty Father) ever be hindered by another ... **And how is He Saviour and Lord, if not the Saviour and Lord of all?** But He is the Saviour of those who have believed ... and **the Lord of those who have**

not believed, till, being enabled to confess Him, they obtain the peculiar and appropriate book which comes by Him. [Christ is] the First Administrator of the Universe, Who by the will of the Father directs the salvation of all ... (the One only Almighty Good God—from the eon and for the eon saving by His Son) ... for all things are arranged with a view to the salvation of the Universe by the Lord of the Universe, both generally and particularly"

"But necessary corrections, **through the goodness of the great Overseeing Judge**, both by the attendant angels, and through various preliminary judgments, or through the Great and Final Judgment, **compel egregious sinners to repent.**"

"We say that **the fire purifies not the flesh but sinful souls, not an all-devouring vulgar fire, but the 'wise fire' as we call it, the fire that 'pierceth the soul' which passes through it.**"

"Fire is conceived of as a **beneficent and strong power, destroying what is base, preserving what is good; therefore this fire is called 'wise' by the Prophets.**"

"Punishment is, in its operation, like medicine; it **dissolves the hard heart, purges away the filth of uncleanness, and reduces the swellings of pride and haughtiness; thus restoring its subject to a sound and healthful state.**"

"At any rate, even suffering is found to be useful alike in medicine and in education, and in punishment; and by means of it; **characters are improved for the benefit of mankind.**"

"And in Him is no darkness at all," that is, no passion, no keeping up of evil respecting anyone; **He destroys no one, but gives salvation to all.**"

"And not only for our sins,' that is, for those of the faithful, is the Lord the Propitiator does he say, 'but also **for the whole world.**' **He, indeed, saves all; but some He saves converting them by punishments; others, however, who follow voluntarily He saves with dignity of honour; so that 'every knee should bow to Him, of things in heaven, or things on earth, and things under the earth'—that is, angels and men.**"

Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD)

Origen was a student of Clement. When Clement was forced to flee Alexandria, Origen became the head of the school in Alexandria. Without doubt, Origen is the most well-known of the early teachers of the restoration of all things, which has led some to call it "Origenism," as if it were devised by this one man.

However, such thinking reveals the prejudice or ignorance of those who insist on eternal punishment in hell.

In the introduction to the writings of Gregory Thaumaturgus as recorded in Volume 6 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, we are told:

"Alexandria continues to be the head of Christian learning ... We have already observed the continuity of the great Alexandrian school; how it arose, and how Pantaenus begat Clement, and Clement begat Origen. **So Origen begat Gregory, and so the Lord has provided for the spiritual generation of the Church's teachers, age after age, from the beginning.** Truly, the Lord gave to Origen a holy seed, better than natural sons and daughters."

According to Origen...

"The Sacred Scripture does, indeed, call our God 'a consuming fire' [Heb. 12:29], and says that 'rivers of fire go before His face' [Dan. 7:10], and that 'He shall come as a refiner's fire and purify the people' [Mal. 3:2-3]. **As therefore, God is a consuming fire; what is it that is to be consumed by Him? We say it is wickedness, and whatever proceeds from it, such as is figuratively called 'wood, hay, and stubble' [1 Cor. 3:15]—which denote the evil works of man.** Our God is a consuming fire in this sense; and He shall come as a refiner's fire to purify rational nature from the alloy of wickedness and other impure matter which has adulterated the intellectual gold and silver; **consuming whatever evil is admixed in all the soul.**"

"But how long this purification which is wrought out by penal fire shall endure, or for how **many eons it shall torment sinners**, He only knows to Whom all judgment is committed by the Father."

"And so it happens that some in the first, others in the second, and others even in the last times, through their endurance of **greater and more severe punishments of long duration**, extending, if I may say so, over many eons, are by these **very stern methods of correction renewed and restored**"

Novation of Rome (~250 AD)

"... **wrath and indignation of the Lord**, so-called, are not such passions as bear those names in man; but that they are operations of the Divine Mind **directly solely to our purification.**"

Didymus the Blind (308-395 AD)

"For although the Judge at times inflicts tortures and anguish on those who merit them, yet he who more deeply scans the reason of things, perceiving the purpose of His goodness, **who desires to amend the sinner, confesses Him to be good.** He who is **our Lord and Saviour inflicts on us everything that may lead us to Salvation; inflicting on us according to His mercy, yet doing this in His judgment.**"

"As mankind by being reclaimed from their sins are to be subjected to Christ in the dispensation appointed for the Salvation of all, so the angels will be reduced to obedience by the correction of their vices."

Gregory of Nazianzen, Bishop of Constantinople (325-390 AD)

"These (apostates), if they will, may go our way, which indeed is Christ's; but if not, let them go their own way. In another place perhaps they shall be **baptized with fire, that last baptism**, which is not only very painful, but enduring also; which eats up, as it were hay, all defiled matter, and **consumes all vanity and vice.**" [Re: lake of fire]

Gregory, Bishop of Nyassa (335-395 AD)

"33. So I begin by asking what is the truth that the divine apostle intends to convey in this passage? It is this. In due course **evil will pass over into non-existence; it will disappear utterly from the realm of existence. Divine and uncompounded goodness will encompass within itself every rational nature; no single being created by God will fail to achieve the kingdom of God.** The evil that is now present in everything will be consumed like a base metal melted by the purifying flame. Then **everything which derives from God will be as it was in the beginning before it had ever received an admixture of evil...."**

"40. And **this is the ultimate goal of our hope, that nothing should be left in opposition to the good, but that the divine life should permeate everything and abolish death from every being, the sin, from which as we have already said, death secured its hold over men, having already been destroyed ... God will be all in all.**"

"44. That last phrase, which speaks of God coming to be in all by becoming all to each, clearly portrays the non-existence of evil. Obviously, **God will be 'in all' only when no trace of evil is to be found in anything. For God cannot be in what is evil. So either He will not be 'in all' and some evil will be left in things, or, if we are to believe that He is 'in all,' then that belief declares that there will be no evil. For God cannot be in what is evil.**"

"The Lord will, in His just judgment, destroy the wickedness of sinners; not their nature ... **Wickedness being thus destroyed, and its imprint being left in none, we shall all be fashioned after Christ, and in all that one character shall shine, which was originally imprinted on our nature.**"

"They who live in the flesh ought, by virtuous conversation, to free themselves from fleshly lusts, **lest after death, they should again need another death, to cleanse away the remains of fleshly vice that cling to them.**"

Victorinus (~360 AD)

"... regenerate all things, as He created all things. By the life that is in Him all things will be cleansed and return into eonian life. Christ is to subject all things to Himself ... when this shall have been accomplished, **God will be in all things, because all things will be full of God.**"

Jerome, Bishop of Bethlehem (340-419 AD)

"In the end of all things the whole body which has been dissipated will be restored ... What I mean is, **the fallen Angel will begin to be that which he was created, and man, who was expelled from Paradise, will once more be restored to the tilling of Paradise. These things will then take place universally.**"

John Chrysostom (347-407 AD)

"... if punishment were an evil to the sinner, God would not have added evils to the evil ... **all punishment is owing to His loving us, by pains to recover us and lead us to Him,** and to deliver us from sin which is worse than hell."

Titus, Bishop of Bostra (~364 AD)

"... the **punishments of God are Holy, as they are remedial and salutary in their effect upon transgressors;** for they are inflicted, **not to preserve them in their wickedness,** but to make them cease from their sins. The abyss ... is indeed the place of punishment, but **it is not endless.** The anguish of their sufferings compels them to break off from their sins."

Ambrose of Milan (340-397 AD)

"Our Saviour has appointed **two kinds of resurrection,** in accordance with which John says, in the Apocalypse, 'Blessed is he that hath part in the **first resurrection;**' **for such come to grace without the judgment.** As for those who do not come to the first, but are reserved until the second (resurrection), these shall be burning **until they fulfill their appointed times,** between the first and second resurrection; or, if they should not have fulfilled in them then, they shall remain still longer in punishment." [Comment: the "burning" of sinners between the first and second resurrection is not found in Revelation].

Given these few citations from early church fathers, it is clear that what I present in this book is not new. If anything, it is simply a truth that has been lost and is in need of recovery in these last days. Obviously, there were others that held the opposing position of eternal punishment.

For example, Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354-430 AD) and one of the most influential forefathers of the Latin church, did not believe in the salvation of all men and a limited (eonian)

chastisement. He believed in eternal judgment. However, even he was compelled to admit that his views were not embraced by all; in fact, he was in the minority.

"... very many, who, though not denying the Holy Scriptures, do not believe in endless torments."

At any rate, there are many others who have believed in the salvation of all mankind, within and without the organized, visible church. This is nothing new. A more contemporary example might surprise you.

Abraham Lincoln – An American Forefather

Among the forefathers of America, one individual stands out as one of our greatest presidents, Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865 AD). It might surprise many that President Lincoln, a deeply devout Christian, believed in the salvation of all mankind. It is said of him that he knew Scripture better than many of the prominent clergy of his day.

Consider the following report of Lincoln's life, as presented in the book by William J. Wolf titled *The Almost Chosen People* (Doubleday & Company Inc, 1959):

"One of Lincoln's associates, Mentor Graham, tells of Lincoln: **'He took the passage, 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,' and followed up with the proposition that whatever the breach or injury of Adam's transgressions to the human race was, which no doubt was very great, was made just and right by the atonement of Christ.'**" (page 47)

"... Lincoln wrote an essay about 1833 on **predestinated universal salvation in criticism of the orthodox doctrine of endless punishment**. It is also consistent with the evidence that in 1850, Lincoln, through the reading of his pastor's *The Christian's Defense* and his own wrestling with the problem, became convinced intellectually of the validity of the biblical revelation. **Lincoln's conviction that God would restore the whole of creation as the outcome of Christ's atonement would have been in itself a bar to membership in the Springfield church he attended.**" (pages 103-104)

"Another associate, Isaac Cogdal, tells of a discussion on religion in Lincoln's office in 1859: 'Lincoln expressed himself in about these words: **He did not nor could not believe in the endless punishment of any one of the human race**. He understood punishment for sin to be a Bible doctrine; that the **punishment was parental in its object, aim, and design**, and intended for the good of the offender; hence **it must cease when justice is satisfied**. He added that **all that was lost by the transgression of Adam was made good by the atonement: all that was lost by the fall was made good by the sacrifice.**" (page 104)

"The second statement was one dictated by Jonathan Harnett of Pleasant Plains, describing a theological discussion in 1858 in Lincoln's office. 'Lincoln covered more ground in a few words than he could in a week, and closed with **the restitution of all things to God, as the doctrine taught in the scriptures**, and if anyone was left in doubt in regard to his belief in the atonement of Christ and **the final salvation of all men**, he removed those doubts in a few questions he answered and propounded to others. After expressing himself, some one or two took exceptions to his position, and he asked a few questions that cornered his interrogators and left no room to doubt or question his **soundness on the atonement of Christ, and salvation finally of all men. He did not pretend to know just when that event would be consummated, but that it would be the ultimate result, that Christ must reign supreme, high over all. The Saviour of all; and the supreme Ruler, he could not be with one out of the fold; all must come in, with his understanding of the doctrine taught in the scriptures.**" (pages 105-106)

President Abraham Lincoln was surely a devout and righteous follower of Christ. Given the state of our nation and all the nations of the world in this day, it seems fitting to close this chapter with the words of this great president.

*"I believe in God, the Almighty Ruler of Nations, our great and good and merciful Maker, our Father in heaven, who notes the fall of a sparrow, and numbers the hairs of our heads. I believe in His eternal truth and justice. I recognize the sublime truth announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history that those nations only are blest whose God is the Lord. **I believe that it is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, and to invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon. I believe that it is meet and right to recognize and confess the presence of the Almighty Father equally in our triumphs and in those sorrows which we may justly fear are a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins to the needful end of our reformation.** I believe that the Bible is the best gift which God has ever given to men. **All the good from the Saviour of the world** is communicated to us through this book. I believe the will of God prevails. Without Him all human reliance is vain. Without the assistance of His divine Being, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Being a humble instrument in the hands of our Heavenly Father, I desire that all my works and acts may be according to His will; and that it may be so, I give thanks to the Almighty, and seek His aid. I have a solemn oath registered in heaven to finish the work I am in, in full view of my responsibility to my God, with malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives me to see the right. Commending those who love me to His care, as I hope in their prayers they will commend me, I look through the help of God to a joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before."*