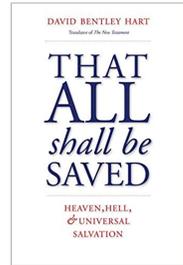


That All Shall be Saved

David Bentley Hart (2019)



*Notes by Bob Evely
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There have been Christian “universalists” – Christians who believe that in the end all persons will be saved and joined to God in Christ – since the earliest centuries of the faith. In fact, all the historical evidence suggests that the universalist faction was at its most numerous, at least as a relative ratio of believers, in the church’s first half millennium.

In the early centuries they were not, for the most part, an especially eccentric company. They cherished the same scriptures as other Christians, worshipped in the same basilicas, lived the same sacramental lives. They even believed in hell, though not in its eternity. To them, hell was the fire of purification described by the Apostle Paul in the third chapter of 1 Corinthians. (1)

Opposition

Some will claim that universalism clearly contradicts the explicit language of scripture (it does not). Others will argue that universalism was decisively condemned as heretical by the fifth Ecumenical Council (it was not). (4)

When God created

I concluded in my juvenile way, if God knows all things, and so knew from everlasting that the final fate of the [individual] would be to suffer everlasting torment, then the very choice to create him had been an act of limitless cruelty. (12)

[Could we love] an omnipotent and omniscient God who has elected to create a reality in which everlasting torture is a possible final destiny for any of its creatures. (13)

Eastern Christian tradition

As I continued to explore the Eastern communions ... I learned at some point to take comfort from an idea that one finds liberally scattered throughout Eastern Christian contemplative tradition ... that the fires of hell are nothing but the glory of God, which must at the last, when God brings about the final restoration of all things, pervade the whole of creation. Although that glory will transfigure the whole cosmos, it will inevitably be experienced as torment by any soul that willfully seals itself against love of God and neighbor. To such a perverse and obstinate nature, the divine light that should enter the soul and transform it from within must seem instead like the flames of an exterior chastisement. (16)

Traditional doctrine

[Traditional doctrine is] an absolute midden of misconceptions, fragments of scriptural language, wrenched out of context, errors of translation, logical contradictions. It came as a great consolation to me when I was still very young to discover that, in the first three or four centuries of the Christian era, none of these notions had yet taken root, in either the East or the West. (25)

Augustine

A notoriously confused reading of scripture ... goes all the way back to the late Augustine; a towering genius whose inability to read Greek and consequent reliance on defective Latin translations turned out to be the single most tragically consequential case of linguistic incompetence in Christian history.

The picture of God [he] produced [is] a metaphysical absurdity: a God who is at once supposedly the source of all things, and yet also one whose nature is necessarily thoroughly

polluted by arbitrariness. And, no matter how orthodox Calvinists might protest, there is no other way to understand the story of election and dereliction that Calvin tells. (49)

He proclaims that God hates the damned, and in fact created them to be the objects of his hatred. (50)

I do not hold Calvin himself necessarily accountable ... since in this matter he was the product of centuries of bad scriptural interpretation, and even worse theological reasoning. (51)

Fathers

It is [a father’s] responsibility to continue to love their children in all conditions, to seek their children’s well-being and (if need be) reformation, and to use whatever natural powers they possess to save their children from ruin. What a happy circumstance, then, if a father happens to possess infinite power. (54)

Seeing God in world events

[We have no warrant] for trying to pass judgment on what we take to be God’s actions in any particular isolated worldly event, since any such event is one whose causes and consequences and conditions and circumstances all quickly slip beyond our ken, and we can have no sense of how that event fits into the pattern of the whole of things. (59)

But [when we are] presented with a comprehensive story that purports to be nothing less than the total narrative and total rationale of all God’s actions in creation, then we may indeed pass judgment on that story’s plausibility. (60)

The author of evil?

Because he is the Good itself, God cannot be the author of absolute injustice, absolute evil. (60)

We know that, logically speaking, he is not merely obliged to do good things; rather, he is himself transcendent goodness, and so cannot be the source of injustice. (61)

Hopeful universalism?

I have very small patience for “hopeful universalism” as it is often called. Anyone who hopes for the universal reconciliation of creatures with God must already believe that this would be the best possible ending to the Christian story; and such a person has then no excuse for imagining that God could bring any but the best possible ending to pass without thereby being in some sense a failed creator. (66)

I would not make [this claim] if I did not earnestly believe every alternative view of the matter to be ultimately unsustainable. It follows more or less ineluctably from any truly coherent contemplation of what it means to see God as the free creator of all things *ex nihilo*; especially when this doctrine is brought into connection with the question of the origins and ends of evil. (67)

Anything done willingly is done toward an end

When we think not from the world to God, but from God to the world ... the first theological insight I learned from Gregory of Nyssa is that the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is an *eschatological* claim about the world’s relation to God. (68)

Anything willingly done is done toward an end; and anything done toward an end is defined by that end. (68)

[When we consider] God’s expression of his own goodness in making the world ... the moral destiny of creation and the moral nature of God are absolutely inseparable. (69)

All that exists comes from one divine source. (71)

Within the story of creation, viewed from its final cause, there can be no residue of the pardonably tragic, no irrecoverable or irreconcilable remainder left behind at the end of the tale; for if there were, this irreconcilable excess would also be something God has directly caused. (71-2)

[When Paul spoke of the vessels of wrath], he believed that all are bound in disobedience, but only so that God might finally show mercy to all (Romans 11:32). (73)

Universalist verses (88)

I shall touch upon a number (though not all) of the New Testament's most famously universalist verses. I simply observe at this point how odd it is that for the last fifteen centuries such passages have been all but lost behind a veil as thin as the one that can be woven from those three or four ambiguous verses that seem (and only *seem*) to threaten eternal torments for the wicked. (88)

For Paul in particular, the marvel of Christ's lordship is that all walls of division between persons and peoples, and finally between all creatures, have fallen, and that ultimately, when creation is restored by Christ, God will be all in all. (89)

The notion of an eternal hell ... is entirely absent from the Pauline corpus, as even the thinnest shadow of a hint. Nor is it anywhere patently present in any of the other epistolary texts. There is one verse in the gospels, Matthew 25:46, that – at least as traditionally understood – offers what seems the strongest evidence for the idea ... [but] the wording leaves room for considerable doubt regarding its true significance. And then there are perhaps a couple of verses from Revelation. [Though the author goes on to note the figurative language found in Revelation and the inability to form clear doctrinal positions.]

True, Jesus speaks of a final judgment, and uses many metaphors to describe the unhappy lot of the condemned. [But] even then, in the relevant verses, those punishments are depicted as having only a limited term. (93)

On the other hand, there are a remarkable number of passages ... that appear to promise a final salvation of all persons and all things, and in the most unqualified terms. [The passages are provided using Hart's own translation from the Greek.] (94-105)

Romans 5:18-19 – so also through one act of righteousness came a rectification of life for all human beings ...

1 Corinthians 15:22 – For just as in Adam all die, so also in the Anointed [Christ] all will be given life.

2 Corinthians 5:14 – one died on behalf of all ...

Romans 11:32 – that he might show mercy to everyone.

1 Timothy 2:3-6 – God, who intends all human beings to be saved and to come to a full knowledge of truth ... the Anointed One, Jesus, who gave himself as a liberation fee for all ...

Titus 2:11 – For the grace of God has appeared, giving salvation to all human beings ...

2 Corinthians 5:19 – reconciling the cosmos to himself ...

Ephesians 1:9-10 – to recapitulate all things in the Anointed, the things in the heavens and the things on earth ...

Colossians 1:27-28 – so that we may present every human being as perfected in the Anointed.

John 12:32 – And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will drag everyone to me.

Hebrews 2:9 – so that by God’s grace he might taste of death on behalf of everyone.

John 17:2 – Just as you gave him power over all flesh, so that you have given everything to him, that he might give them life in the Age.

John 4:42 – this man is truly the savior of the cosmos.

John 12:47 – that I might save the cosmos.

1 John 4:14 – the Father has sent the Son as savior of the cosmos.

2 Peter 3:9 – for all to advance to a change of heart.

Matthew 18:14 – It is not a desire that occurs to your Father in the heavens that one of these little ones should perish.

Philippians 2:9-11 – that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend ... and every tongue gladly confess ...

Colossians 1:19-20 – to reconcile all things to him ...

1 John 2:2 – He is atonement for our sins, and not only for ours, but for the whole cosmos.

John 3:17 – that the cosmos might be saved through him.

Luke 16:16 – since then the good tidings of God’s Kingdom are being proclaimed, and everyone is being forced into it.

1 Timothy 4:10 – God who is the savior of all human beings, especially those who have faith.

1 Corinthians 15:23-24 – And each in the proper order ... then the full completion, when he delivers the Kingdom to him who is God and Father ... [Only at the very end of these three stages is there “full completion” ... culminating in ...]

1 Corinthians 15:28 – that God may be all in all.

[Note: Check each of these passages to examine the full context as noble Bereans would do. I especially recommend The Concordant Literal translation as being a most consistent and faithful rendering from the original languages.]

Hell

There is no single Greek term in the New Testament that quite corresponds – or corresponds at all, really – to the Anglo-Saxon word “hell.”

The image of hell ... took ever more opulent and terrifying mythical shape in later Christian centuries. (112)

Judgment (kolasis)

The word’s [*kolasis*] special connotation of corrective rather than retributive punishment was still appreciated and observed by educated writers for centuries after the time of Christ. (117)

Hell

It is hard, I know, to convince most Christians that the picture of hell with which they were raised is not lavishly on display in the pages of scripture. In part, conventional practices of translation – such as the aforementioned custom of using the single English word “hell” as a collective translation for Gehenna, Hades and Tartarus – are much to blame for this.

I have seen translations that do not follow the established pattern in this regard ... accused of attempting to expel the traditional picture of hell from the text. But surely translators who have merely rescued distinctions in meaning present in the original Greek can not be said to have expelled hell from scripture. (118)

Aeon / Age

Throughout the whole of ancient and late antique Greek literature, an *aeon* was most properly an “age,” which is simply to say a “substantial period of time” or an “extended interval.” (121)

For educated Jewish scholars of Christ’s time (or thereabouts) who wrote in Greek, such as Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE – c. 50 CE) and Josephus (37- c. 100), an aeon was still understood as only a limited period of time, often as brief as a single lifespan, occasionally as long as three generations. (123)

The Platonists believed in the torments of “hell” long before the Christians fastened upon the idea. The Neo-platonist philosopher Olympiodorus the Younger (c. 495-570) thought it obvious that the suffering of wicked souls in Tartarus is certainly not endless, but merely very long in duration. (124)

The hardening of Israel

For the time being, true, a part of Israel is hardened, but this will remain the case only until the “full entirety” of the gentiles enters in. The unbelievers among the children of Israel may have been allowed to stumble, but God will never allow them to fall. And so, if their failure now brings enrichment to the world, how much more will they provide when their own “full entirety” enter in?

It turns out that there is no final illustrative division between vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy. God’s wisdom far surpasses ours, and his love can accomplish all that it intends. He has bound everyone in disobedience so as to show mercy to everyone (Romans 11:32). (137)

Paul’s great attempt to demonstrate that God’s election is not some arbitrary act of predilective exclusion, but instead a providential means for bringing about the unrestricted inclusion of all persons. (138)

Creation and redemption

For [Gregory of Nyssa], the making and redemption of the world belong to that one great process by which God brings to pass the perfect creation that has resided from everlasting in the divine will. All of created time is, he believed, nothing but the gradual unfolding, in time and by way of change, of God’s eternal and immutable design. (139)

When time and times are done, will a truly redeemed humanity, one that has passed beyond all ages, be recapitulated in Christ. Only then also, in the ultimate solidarity of all humankind, will a being made in the image and likeness of God have truly been created. (140)

Gregory [who is quoted extensively in this book] argues in “On the Making of Humanity” that evil is inherently finite and builds toward an ending. Evil is a tale that can have only an immanent conclusion. (143-4)

Tradition

Most are captives of systems of theology that arose in the sixteenth century and after. (163)

Gregory – removed though he was by three centuries from the time of the Apostles – understood the original Greek terms of the Bible better than do most modern Christians, and he inhabited an intellectual and religious world much nearer that of the New Testament than ours is. His theology was *thoroughly* universalist. (164)

Infinite love

This omnipotent God is also infinite love. (170)

Man's will

The will, when freely moved, does nothing except toward an end: conceived, perceived, imagined, hoped for, resolved upon ... (176)

If there is such a thing as eternal perdition as the result of an eternal refusal of repentance, it must also be the result of an eternal ignorance. (178)

[God] is not merely some external agency who would have to exercise coercion or external compulsion of a creature's intentions to bring them to the end he decrees. If he were, then the entire Christian doctrine of providence – the vital teaching that God can so order all conditions, circumstances, and contingencies among created things as to bring about everything he wills for his creatures while still not in any way violating the autonomy of secondary causality – would be a logical contradiction. God, in his omnipotence and omniscience, is wholly capable of determining the result of all secondary causes, including free will, while not acting as yet another discrete cause among them.

Knowing not only all the events that constitute each individual life, but also all of an agent's inner motives and predispositions and desires – all thoughts, impulses, hopes, preferences, yearnings, and aversions – and so knowing what choice any given soul will make when confronted with certain options and situated among certain circumambient forces, God can (if nothing else) so arrange the shape of reality that all beings, one way or another, come at the last upon the right path by way of their own freedom, in this life or the next.

In a very limited way, of course, we can all at times do something similar ... for example, enticing a child to eat a slice of cake when hungry.

And God, being infinitely resourceful and infinitely knowledgeable, can weave the whole of time into a perfectly coherent continuity ... (184)

Should God providentially arrange the contingencies of every life, and do so unremittingly till all evil has vanished altogether – in this world and the world to come, even if needs be by way of purgation – guiding every soul to the only final end it can ever truly freely desire, this would be no trespass upon the sanctity of the autonomous will. (186)

God all in all

Could there be a final state of things in which God is all in all while yet there existed rational creatures whose inward worlds consisted in an eternal rejection of and rebellion against God as the sole and consuming and fulfilling end of the rational will's most essential nature? Would God's victory over every sphere of being really be complete? (193)

[As for the possibility of annihilation], the ultimate annihilation of all the wicked souls that have ever been would still not constitute the total victory promised in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. (194)

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