

Is Damnation Real?



Last Judgment (detail), Fra Angelico, c. 1431

Dear Father Kerper: If God loves everyone, how can anyone be damned to Hell forever? This seems to be the opposite of love. So, is damnation real? Do I have to believe in it?

Yes, damnation is real. Of course, many people, including some believing Christians, would like to suppress this troubling truth; but Sacred Scripture frequently and clearly asserts the real possibility of eternal loss. As such, damnation is an essential element of “Gospel truth” and must be received as “Good News.” But how can any sane person regard damnation as good news?

The teaching about damnation is “good news” because it powerfully affirms the mystery of genuine human freedom, which undergirds the eternal durability of our moral choices. Let’s now consider two key terms: damnation and freedom.

When we hear the word “damnation” we usually cringe in horror, thinking of some type of devastating eternal punishment imposed on some poor soul by a vindictive and unforgiving God. Where’s the love and mercy? How can this be? Doesn’t damnation contradict everything we believe about God?

To begin with, we must note that the Greek New Testament has no single word that means “damnation.” Usually we think of this as a judicial sentence, something like life in prison without death, a truly horrifying situation.

Older English versions of the New Testament, unfortunately, used the word “damnation” to translate four Greek words and phrases that actually mean “an irrevocable negative judgment of human behavior.” Sometimes this was rendered as “condemnation.”

By looking more closely at the Greek words, we begin to see something crucially important: “damnation” is not an arbitrary punishment inflicted on a sinner by God; rather “damnation” is God’s final evaluation and verification of a whole series of free moral choices made by a person through his or her lifetime. Because God always acts in an absolutely truthful way, God cannot render a favorable judgment for someone who lived in a gravely evil manner throughout his or her life and never repented.

Perhaps an example here will help us move beyond the abstract. Consider this: If a high school student enrolled in Algebra I plays video games during class time, never studies, refuses to turn in homework assignments, gets a zero on the final exam, and then gets a big red “F” from the teacher, would anyone complain that the teacher had “damned” the poor student? Of course not! The big red “F” emerges directly from the student’s freely-chosen behavior. The teacher simply certifies that the failure has truly happened. Moreover, the student who flunks Algebra can’t – and shouldn’t – move on to Calculus, which is incomprehensible without a grounding in algebra. The student – not the teacher – has closed the door to advancement in mathematics.

Here we see the interconnection between human freedom and judgment. Without genuine freedom, there’s nothing to judge. Freedom here means

the real possibility of making a choice for good or evil without anything being predetermined or coerced. Please remember, God created human beings, not robots. While people are capable of being good or evil, robots are not.

Now, the ultimate outcome of life – damnation or eternal life in the presence of God and the communion of saints – is vastly more important than how we do in school, but the same principle is at work. Our moral choices, which we freely make in and through God’s grace, shape us as persons who are predominantly good or evil, either oriented completely toward love of God and neighbor or away from God and back into the isolated self.

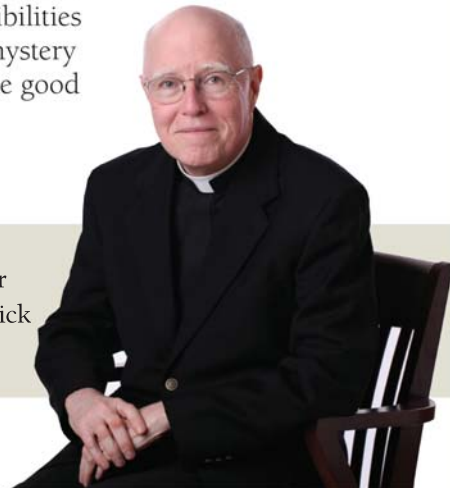
In the end, damnation is God’s definitive evaluation that a person has freely chosen to turn completely inward, thereby choosing to live alone within a self-constructed prison cell with no key.

T. S. Eliot, the great Anglo-Catholic poet and playwright, put it this way in his play, *The Cocktail Party*: “What is hell? Hell is oneself. Hell is alone...”

Though God intensely desires eternal happiness for every human being, and extends mercy and forgiveness to everyone who asks, God also respects the freedom of people to choose radical forms of self-isolation, which obliterates every speck of love in their existence. To use the words of George Bernanos in his *Diary of a Country Priest*, “Hell means not to love anymore.” Because God is love, those who refuse to live in love exclude themselves from eternal life.

The big red “F” at the end of life – damnation – is scrawled in the handwriting of the damned, not of God. As that happens, God sadly assents to the free choice against love made by the person who was made for love, but a love born in true freedom, not coercion.

So, damnation is very real. And so is the glory and joy of eternal life. These two contrary possibilities verify the reality of the mystery of freedom. And that’s the good news of damnation.



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