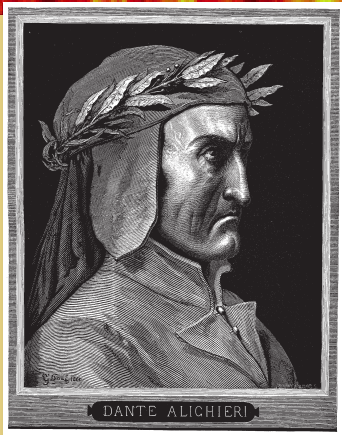
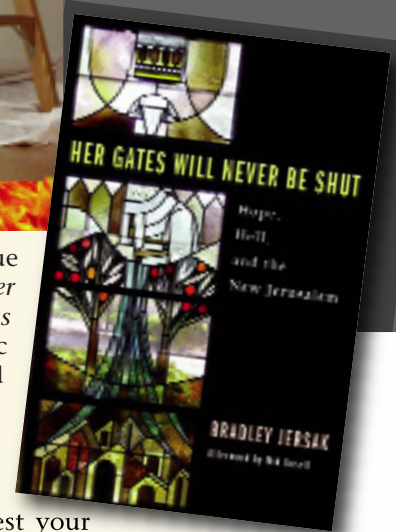


Remodeling Hell?

by Brad Jersak

Her Gates Will Never Be Shut is a courageous, groundbreaking, Christ-centered examination of one of the most hotly debated and fervently believed topics in Christendom—for that matter in religion at large. The following is author Brad Jersak's summary statement by way of introduction, reprinted by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers.

—The Editors



The Inferno

If Dante were to revisit the *Inferno* today, he would find his visions of hell deeply embedded in our Western psyche, culture, and religion. Images of fire and brimstone, dungeons and torture, demons and judgment continue to ignite imaginations and controversy. In our era of CGI [Editor's note: Computer Generated Imagery], everything Dante described in poetry can be recreated on the big screen for those who want to face their deepest fears in a climate-controlled environment where the smell of buttered popcorn masks the stench of sulfur. Modernized upgrades

THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO
THE SUFFERING CITY,
THROUGH ME THE WAY TO
THE ETERNAL PAIN,
THROUGH ME THE WAY THAT
RUNS AMONG THE LOST.
JUSTICE URGED ON MY HIGH
ARTIFICER;
MY MAKER WAS DIVINE
AUTHORITY,
THE HIGHEST WISDOM,
AND THE PRIMAL LOVE.
BEFORE ME NOTHING BUT
ETERNAL THINGS WERE MADE,
AND I ENDURE ETERNALLY.
ABANDON EVERY HOPE,
YE WHO ENTER HERE.¹

of medieval artwork imbue movies like *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and *What Dreams May Come* (1998); comic books like *Hellblazer* and *Hellboy*; and video games like *Inferno*. One can even take the *Dante's Inferno Test* online,² where visitors are exhorted, "Test your impurity, find out which level of *Dante's* hell you will be spending eternity in." And for a personal taste of hell, why not marinate some chicken wings in *Dan-T's White Hot Inferno* sauce? I'm sure even Dante would be confused: Is hell a place, a state or a brand?

Western civilization does not hold a monopoly on the dreams and nightmares of the afterlife. Taoist and Buddhist mythology contain their own layered maze of terrifying torture chambers (*Diyu*),³ and the Hindu *Naraka*⁴ features the usual fire, boiling oil and other instruments of abuse for karmic atonement between incarnations. And Dante's hell barely holds a torch to the hellish punishments described in the Koran:⁵

Garments of fire have been prepared for the unbelievers. Scalding water shall be poured upon their heads, melting their skins and that which is in their bellies. They shall be lashed with rods of iron. Whenever, in their anguish, they try

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to escape from Hell, back they shall be dragged, and will be told: "Taste the torment of the Conflagration!" (22:19-23)

Global belief in some form of divine judgment remains as unquenchable as its flames, the New Atheists⁶ notwithstanding. For their part, writers like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins give voice to those whose atheism is rooted less in unbelief than in hatred of a religion-projected god whose mind reflects humanity's need to best one eternal excruciation with another. They and Bill Maher mock such notions as patently *religulous* and write off faith as laughable were it not for its dangerous capacity to incite fear and violence.⁷

Do they have a point? I can only offer my own experience in response. As a sensitive little boy raised in the evangelical church, I was a horrified but Bible-convinced infernalist.⁸ I accepted in good faith the word of camp counselors who described the fate of the lost as we stoked orange coals during late night marshmallow roasts. Seeing as I had prayed the "sinner's prayer," they assured me I had no need to worry. But worry I did.

What about the unchurched cousins I loved so dearly? God loved them, but if they didn't love him back, he would skewer them on an everlasting rotisserie—just like the stick I used for roasting my marshmallows. My great commission was to "snatch others from the fire and save them" (Jude 23). And if I failed, I feared their blood would be on my hands (Ezekiel 33:6).

Just as awful as being that traumatized eight-year-old camper was the fact that I was being groomed to become the next zealous coun-



selor. My first convert responded quickly to the choice between eternal life and everlasting flames. I remember being troubled by his expression—not the wide-eyed fear I expected, just incredulity and a rushed prayer before the dinner bell rang. I sensed that he was unconvinced of the gravity of the decision, especially when I discovered that he had "fallen away" within days of returning home.

Highly visual, I became overwhelmed by mental images of bubbling skin and the attendant shrieks of the masses with whom I went to school, stood in line with at McDonalds, and prayed for every night before bed. Unlike Hitchens and Dawkins, I knew and loved (and feared) a living God too much to junk my entire worldview just because the idea of eternal,

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conscious torment in hell clashed with what I conceived to be his loving character.

I tried to swallow the discrepancies in denial or wallpaper over the holes like a writer trying to hide glitches in a bad plot. But eventually, the necessary rational and emotional disconnect got caught in my throat. There it would remain until I could discover an alternative view that was just as

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faithful to the Bible—not that I even dared to hope one existed. If only I had realized that the Christian theologians were already on the case—had been for centuries.

Renovating Hell: Theological Options for Divine Judgment

Sheltered in my tiny corner of Christendom, like many evangelicals I was unaware of the heated discussion around damming up the river of fire through various alternative perspectives on hell that did not transform God into a wrathful tyrant-judge who consigns the unrepentant to Dantesque tortures for eternity. As it turns out, the view of hell with which I grew up—infernalism—is only one of several options handed down to us through our forefathers in the faith. We will survey each of them briefly here.

Infernalism

Many or even most Christians across the church spectrum are still convinced that to be a good, Bible-believing Christian, they must ac-

cept a hell of eternal, conscious torment. They may secretly repress doubts or privately concede to skepticism, but they still believe that the Bible teaches infernalism only. Infernalists range in opinion from belief in hell as a literal place with actual flames to a spiritual state of anguish of the soul. They are taught to presume that hell must be populated by the damned: those who refused salvation during

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their lifespan. After all, they reason, how else can one interpret key texts like Matthew 25:31–46 (the goats who go into eternal punishment), Luke 16:19–31 (the rich man who is in inescapable “agony in this fire”), and the “lake of burning sulfur where the smoke of torment rises forever and ever” (Revelation 14:10; 20:10)? This view of hell leads to evangelical fervor, a desire to see as few people as possible condemned to such a terrible place.

Annihilationism

Others teach that “perishing” (John 3:16) is synonymous with death or eradication, rendering a full stop to the existence of the unredeemed. Some annihilationists believe that death itself is the end and that only those prepared for everlasting life will experience the resurrection (“conditional immortality”). Others believe that the wicked will be raised to life again, judged for their deeds, and then damned to the lake of fire, where they are completely consumed. Rather than being supernaturally sustained to endure endless torture, “both body and soul are destroyed” (Matthew 10:28) in a “second death” (Revelation 21:8), which vaporizes the whole person (Psalm 37) to ashes (Malachi 4). The annihilationist sees justice done justly, with spiritual capital



punishment performed quickly and compassionately. Any weeping, wailing, or gnashing of teeth refers to the grief over receiving one’s sentence, not some ongoing, agonized state of consciousness.⁹

Universalism

A breadth of other views find shelter under the umbrella term “universalism.” Many modern universalists believe that hell doesn’t exist and that everyone goes to heaven—whatever that happens to be. No particular faith is necessary, and not even the most heinous crimes can disqualify anyone from Paradise. After all, in God’s indiscriminate grace, “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

At the opposite end of the universalist continuum is the doctrine of “ultimate redemption.” Ancients like Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa are often labeled “universalists,” but they

Thus, if we become dogmatic about any one position, we reduce ourselves to reading selectively or doing interpretive violence to those verses that don’t fit our chosen view.

certainly believed in the existence of a lake or river of fire and insisted that many must pass through it. But for them, the cleansing fire would be curative chastisement that prepares one for God’s presence. In fact, the fire might even be God’s presence. Therefore, hell would eventually be empty or its refining purpose would come to an end.¹⁰

All of these points of view reflect theological concerns for representing God’s character aright, pastoral concerns for guarding and guiding God’s flock in the truth, evangelistic concerns for presenting the Gospel with integrity, and biblical concerns for faithfulness to Christian Scripture.¹¹ So how is it that we’ve come to such differing positions?

Informing Theology

How do we arrive at our cosmology of hell? What informs our biases, preferences, or sense of obligation to adopt a particular teaching? In addition to the Scriptures we choose for our focus, how we view hell also depends on:

1. Our View of God: Is God primarily a God of love, justice, and mercy or righteous anger? Is his primary posture toward humanity enmity or compassion? Does God’s holiness allow or prevent fellowship with sinful people? Is God

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free to forgive or bound by righteousness to punish? Is he absolutely approachable (Hebrews 4:16) or infinitely unapproachable (1 Timothy 6:16)?

2. Our View of the Atonement: Was the Cross about God pouring out his wrath upon Christ or us pouring our wrath out upon God? Was God punishing Jesus in our place (ultimate justice) or were we murdering God's perfect love (ultimate injustice)? Was it about final payment for sin-debts or final forgiveness of sin-debts? Does the Cross save us from God, the devil, sin, death, or ourselves?¹²

3. Our Approach to Scripture: When we read the Bible, do we tend to interpret the images literally or metaphorically? Do we feel we are more faithful to the text when we take it as literally as the language allows or when we are most sensitive to the authors' use of symbols? Are we more prone to ignore verses that don't fit our doctrinal presuppositions or are we more apt to bend them into our framework?

4. Our Personal Need: Do we feel the need to ignore, minimize, or do away with hell because we cannot allow that a loving God could conceive, create, or implement such a monstrosity? Or do we desperately need hell, because in this world of atrocities, God could not be considered holy, righteous, and just without it? Do we require such a place with which to threaten unbelievers into salvation and believers into faithfulness? Or, like the annihilationists, do we look for a proportionate combination of compassion and punishment in our desire to prevent God from vanquishing evil with a far greater evil?

Herein Lies the Problem

The stubborn fact is that Scripture is richly polyphonic on the topic of hell and judgment—as if by design. Thus, if we become dogmatic about any one position, we reduce ourselves to reading selectively or doing interpretive violence to those verses that don't fit our cho-



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sen view. Our theological prejudices blind us to passages we may have read many times but never really seen. Even a tentative removal of traditionalist lenses leads to the question, “Why didn't I ever see that verse before?” The complexity of the text is not a deficiency! If we can momentarily suspend our penchant for forcing the text to harmonize with our systems or even with itself, we'll see some magnificent tensions between those old Moroccan leather covers.

For example, the Bible repeatedly affirms that God has given humanity the real capacity for authentic choice. To choose between life and death, heaven and hell, and mercy and wrath implies the real possibility that some could choose the way that leads to destruction. The Bible testifies that some may opt for choices that result in permanent posthumous exclusion (the lake of fire, outer darkness, etc.)

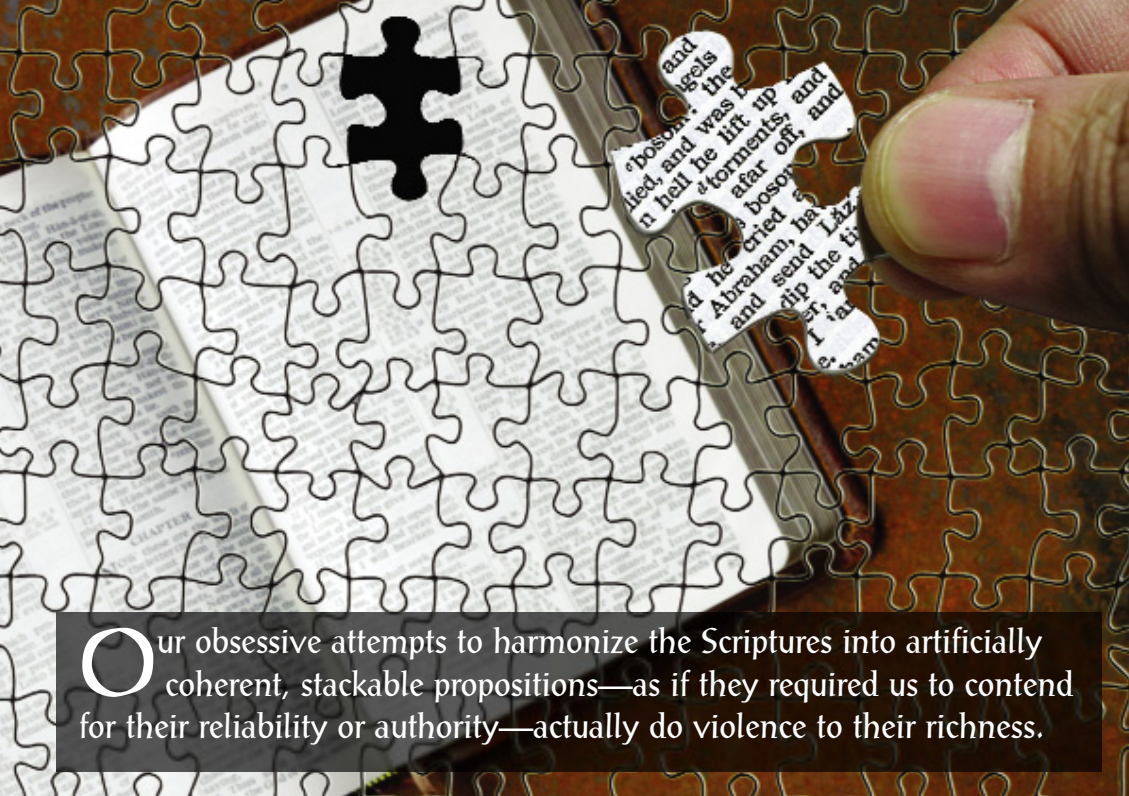
On the other hand, the Bible just as plainly teaches that God is also free: free to relent, free to forgive, free to restore even when judgment is promised (Hosea 11; Jonah 1:1; 3:4, 10; 4:2, 11), free to pursue lost sheep “until he finds them,” free

to play out a cosmic history where, in the end, “every knee will bow,” “all things will be restored,” “everything will be reconciled,” and “all will be made alive,” a time when absolutely everything will be “summed up in Christ,” and when Christ will, in turn, hand a saved cosmos over to his Father so “that God may be all in all.”

The Alpha purposes of God for the universe will come to their Omega point in Jesus Christ. Thus, before we plant our flag on any one version of hell, we must take all of the biblical texts on hell and judgment, mercy and restoration into account.

These three types of passages, which I will call *infernalist*, *annihilationist* and *universalist* texts, cannot be integrated easily into a cogent dogmatic system. In fact, my argument for hope over presumption is just this: the Bible doesn't allow us to settle easily on any of these as “isms.”

Perhaps that's because humankind needs all of these voices. Maybe God would have the wicked tremble before the infernalist passages and renounce their evil works. He would comfort the af-



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flicted with the promise of justice and a day of accounting, and he would have “the elect” embrace the broader hope of the universalist verses. We joyfully hope for the best but bow heart and knee to the justice and mercy of God. Thus, one voice cannot be absolutized without negating the others. Our obsessive attempts to harmonize the Scriptures into artificially coherent, stackable propositions—as if they required us to contend for their reliability or authority—actually do violence to their richness.

Presumptions and Possibilities

So where does that leave us? Setting aside preconceptions as best we can, what does the Bible actually teach us about judgment and hell when we read it carefully and take it seriously? Not “what do I

doesn’t presume or negate any of these positions, one that accepts the reality of judgment but hopes that somehow everyone might one day be reconciled to God?

Rather than painting themselves into universalist or infernalist corners, a great many of the Church Fathers and early Christians found refuge in the humility of hope. They maintained the *possibility* (not the presumption) of some version of judgment and hell and the twin *possibility* (not presumption) that at the end of the day, no one need suffer it forever. For several centuries, scholars and mystics engaged in experimental theology, warning that none should presume upon universal redemption because of the possibility of damnation *and* that none should presume upon hell for anyone else other

important thing is to recognize your bias and be able to defend or explain it. As a “critical realist,”¹⁴ I spend a good deal of time and energy studying my biases—how they emerged, and how they influence my thinking. Rather than pretending to be perfectly objective, I confess that since my early days as a terrified infernalist, I have developed a strong preference for hope.

I hope in the Good News that God’s love rectifies every injustice through forgiveness and reconciliation. The Gospel of hope that I can preach boldly is this:

God is not angry with you and never has been. He loves you with an everlasting love. Salvation is not a question of “turn or burn.” We’re burning already, but we don’t have to be! Redemption! The

This eschatological hope has little in common with the fashionable pop-universalism that scorns judgment and hell as medieval myths and that assumes everybody is “in” regardless of their beliefs and behaviors in this life. Quite the opposite: the hope of ultimate redemption is as inclusive in its judgment as it is in its salvation. All are held to account, all pass through the fire so that all may be purified and glorified. Mercy triumphs over judgment; it does not skirt it.

Biased Toward Hope

We all have a bias. The

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imagine about hell?” or “what do I wish about hell if it were up to me?” Furthermore, what do judgment and hell say about God’s character? For that is the real issue at stake here. Is there a way to approach the subject of hell that

than perhaps oneself. For them, peace came not from certainty of knowing how it would all pan out but from a solid hope in God’s great love and mercy—that Jesus’ plan to save the whole world might actually work.¹³

life and death of Christ showed us how far God would go to extend forgiveness and invitation. His resurrection marked the death of death and the evacuation of Hades. My hope is in Christ, who rightfully earned his judgment seat and

Hope. That is my bias, and I believe that Scripture, tradition, and experience confirm it... Hope presumes nothing but is rooted in a deeper confidence: the love and mercy of an openhearted and relentlessly kind God.

whose verdict is restorative justice, that is to say, mercy.

Hope. That is my bias, and I believe that Scripture, tradition, and experience confirm it. I want to explain and validate my hope in those contexts. This book will address the central problem of this “heated” debate: *not* infernalism versus annihilationism versus universalism, but rather, authentic, biblical Christian hope vis-à-vis the error of dogmatic presumption (of any view).¹⁵ Hope presumes nothing but is rooted in a deeper confidence: the love and mercy of an openhearted and relentlessly kind God.

In short, I do not intend to convince readers of a particular theology of divine judgment. I hope, rather, to recall those relevant bits of Scripture, history, and tradition that ought to inform whatever view we take on this important topic. That said, the data summarized herein did lead me to four conclusions, which you may or may not share after all is said and done:

1. We cannot presume to know that all will be saved or that any will not be saved.

2. The revelation of God in Christ includes real warnings about the possibility of damnation for some and also the real possibility that redemption may extend to all.

3. We not only dare hope and pray that God’s mercy would finally triumph over judgment; the love of God obligates us to such hope.

4. Revelation 21–22 provides a test case for a biblical theology of eschatological hope.

To summarize our direction, I quote Hermann-Josef Lauter.

*Will it really be all men who allow themselves to be reconciled? No theology or prophecy can answer this question, but love hopes all things (1 Corinthians 13:7). It cannot do otherwise than to hope for the reconciliation of all men in Christ. Such unlimited hope is, from a Christian standpoint, not just permitted but commanded.*¹⁶ □

1. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto 3.
2. <http://www.4degreez.com/misc/dante-inferno-test.mv>.
3. “Diyu,” <http://www.viswiki.com/en/Diyu>.
4. Subhanji Devi Dasi, “Vedic Knowledge Online,” paragraph 3.
5. Koran 18:23–30; 40:67–73; 44:40–49; 73:12, etc. See also “Descriptions of Hell in Islam,” Shariah Program Articles Library.
6. In particular, see Hitchens’ *God is Not Good and Dawkins’ The God Delusion*.
7. See Bill Maher’s recent documentary, *Religulous* (2008).
8. “Infernalism” is belief in hell as eternal, conscious torment of the unbeliever.
9. See also Matthew 7:13; John 10:28; 17:12; Romans 2:12; 9:22; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 15:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15; 4:3; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; 2:10; Hebrews 10:39; James 4:12; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 17:8, 11.
10. To some readers, this type of universalism will sound much like purgatory. Some Roman Catholics would agree, because purgatory functions redemptively. The Eastern Orthodox would not, since Catholic purgatory was historically punitive rather than pedagogical or medicinal. Besides, Augustine, the infernalist, believed in purgatory, too, but only for the elect. The damned were not given any postmortem opportunity of redemption. God’s refinery (Malachi 3) cleanses and perfects us but is not necessarily equated directly to purgatory or even the afterlife.
11. Jonathan Stanley comments: “I think it is helpful to include ‘ethical concerns’ to communicate that all views are concerned with not undermining justice (though they employ very different notions of justice in the process). You flag and deal with the question of justice in terms of God’s character (just? merciful? wrathful?), but I think flagging the way our views of final judgment frame and guide our attempts to do and establish justice in the real interpersonal, social, and political conflicts of history draws things together and foreshadow your very helpful suggestion in the end of the book that the final judgment will be something like a grand ‘truth and reconciliation commission.’ Our view of final judgment must not undermine our commitment to justice, or as Moltmann says, leaning on Horkheimer, our view of final judgment must not allow ‘the perpetrator to triumph over his innocent victim’—according to Moltmann, infernalism, annihilationism, and presumptive universalism allow this to happen (in their own ways).” (Jonathan Stanley, email, June, 2009).
12. See also Jersak & Hardin, *Stricken by God?*
13. Jonathan Stanley, editor of *The Other Journal*, comments: “I appreciate the distinction between ‘presumption’ and ‘hope’ which allows you to distinguish between presumptive and hopeful universalisms, and opens the door to an evangelical universalism of the hopeful sort. Following Moltmann, I think it might be helpful to expand your taxonomy of universalisms to ‘presumptive’ (or dogmatic), ‘wishful,’ and ‘hopeful’—that would further distinguish between ‘wishful thinking’ and ‘hopeful thinking’ and the types of universalism that follow. For Jurgen Moltmann, there is a ‘knowing (in hope)’ that while not presumptive (it must happen) surpasses wishful thinking (it might happen) and provides the ground to confess ‘I know (i.e., in the knowledge of hope) it will happen.’ I think your ‘hopeful universalism’ is more hopeful than wishful (and thus very close to Moltmann), but I think it would help to critique the ‘presumptive’ (liberal) and the ‘wishful’ (agnostic) equally to really create the space for the distinctiveness of your proposal of a ‘hopeful’ (evangelical) universalism.” (Jonathan Stanley, email, June 2009). I hear Stanley—though I cannot quite say, “I know,” I experience peaceful confidence when I pray for mercy from the One who is Love.

14. Critical realism acknowledges objectively knowable, mind-independent reality whilst admitting the limitations of perception and cognition. E.g., “God is real. I can know God, but I know God through subjective filters that may distort God’s image significantly. “For now we see through glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:11, KJV).

15. This statement by Wright, reminiscent of von Balthasar and Karl Rahner, lays out my thesis exactly: “All this should warn us against the cheerful double dogmatism that has bedeviled discussion on these topics—the dogmatism, that is, of the person who knows exactly who is and who isn’t ‘going to hell’ and of the universalist who is absolutely certain that there is no such place or that if there is, it will, at the last, be empty.” (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 177).

16. Hermann-Josef Lauter, *Pastoralblatt*, 123.

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Brad Jersak and his wife Eden live in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia—not far from Hope but a safe distance from Hell’s Gate! When he’s not hiking the local mountains with his dog Jack, Brad is working on a research degree in Philosophy of Religion (Bangor University, Wales) and offering a variety of seminars to churches around the globe twice a month.



ONLINE INTERVIEW
AT PTM.ORG

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Join Greg Albrecht for a fascinating discussion with Brad Jersak about his book, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*.