

Revelation

Lesson #16

The Millennial Kingdom

(20: 1-15)

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Review

After a chorus of praise from the twenty-four elders and a vast multitude in heaven, Lesson #15 presented the climactic “Battle of Armageddon” as Christ returned, riding a white horse and leading his army of saints. They quickly crushed Satan’s forces, led by the Antichrist and the False Prophet, who were captured and *“thrown alive into the fiery pool with burning sulfur”* (19: 20).

All the rest of Satan’s minions became carrion, food for the birds of the air, who gorged themselves on their rotting corpses.

Preview

With Christ's return and his decisive victory over Satan and his minions, Christ and his saints reign for 1,000 years. He imprisons Satan during this time, but then at the end of the 1,000 years, Satan is set free to deceive the earth once more! His third defeat is final, and his punishment is swift and severe: Satan is *“thrown into the pool of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were. There they [are] tormented day and night forever and ever”* (20: 10).

Lesson #16 presents the “millennial kingdom,” Christ's 1,000 year reign. Of all the topics in Revelation, this is perhaps the most difficult to fit neatly into Revelation's overall pattern and structure. In this lesson we examine the difficulties, and we propose a solution.

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After the fall of Babylon, Christ's triumphal return, the victory at Armageddon and the destruction of the Antichrist and the False Prophet in the lake of fire, it would seem that history has finally reached its conclusion.

But Satan, though defeated, is still on the loose!

Here, in Revelation 20 we capture Satan, throw him into the abyss and lock and seal it over him. While Satan is confined, the 1,000 year reign of Christ and his saints begins, only to end with Satan being released. True to character, he leads his third and final assault on God, and once more he suffers defeat. This time he, too, is cast into the fiery pool, never to rise again.

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“Then I saw an angel come down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the abyss and a heavy chain. He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, which is the Devil or Satan, and tied it up for a thousand years and threw it into the abyss, which he locked over it and sealed, so that it could no longer lead the nations astray until the thousand years are completed. After this, it is to be released for a short time.”

(20: 1-3)

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“Satan Bound,” *Apocalypse* (miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 34r), c. 1370-1390. British Library, London.

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- After the catastrophic defeat at Armageddon and the destruction of the beast and the false prophet, we can only imagine Satan on the run, a fugitive in a hidey-hole, quickly discovered, pried from beneath a slimy rock and taken into custody by an angel from heaven.

- **“He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, which is the Devil or Satan”**—the very “serpent” we first met in the Garden of Eden during his seduction of Adam and Eve, the opening of our story—and the angel casts him **“into the abyss,”** locking and sealing it over him. In New Testament times, the ἄβυσσος [ah'-bus-sos]—the “abyss”—is the land of the dead, a land crawling with demonic spirits (Luke 8: 31).



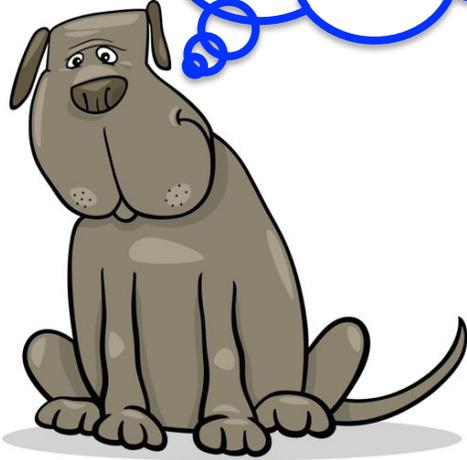
- Notice that Satan is locked in the abyss so that he could no longer “lead the nations astray,” [πλανάω, plah-nah'-o]. In 12: 9, the back story of the war in heaven, that is exactly what Satan did, he “deceived [πλανάω] the whole world.”

- In the prologue to the book of Job, Satan enters the court of heaven and the Lord asks, “Where have you been?” to which Satan replies, “Roaming the earth . . .” (1: 7). And John tells us in his first epistle that “the whole world is under the power of the evil one” (5: 19).

- Now, locked in the abyss, Satan’s power is limited. Importantly, he is not *destroyed*; rather, he is *imprisoned* and is no longer able to exercise his power over the nations. But his presence can still be felt.

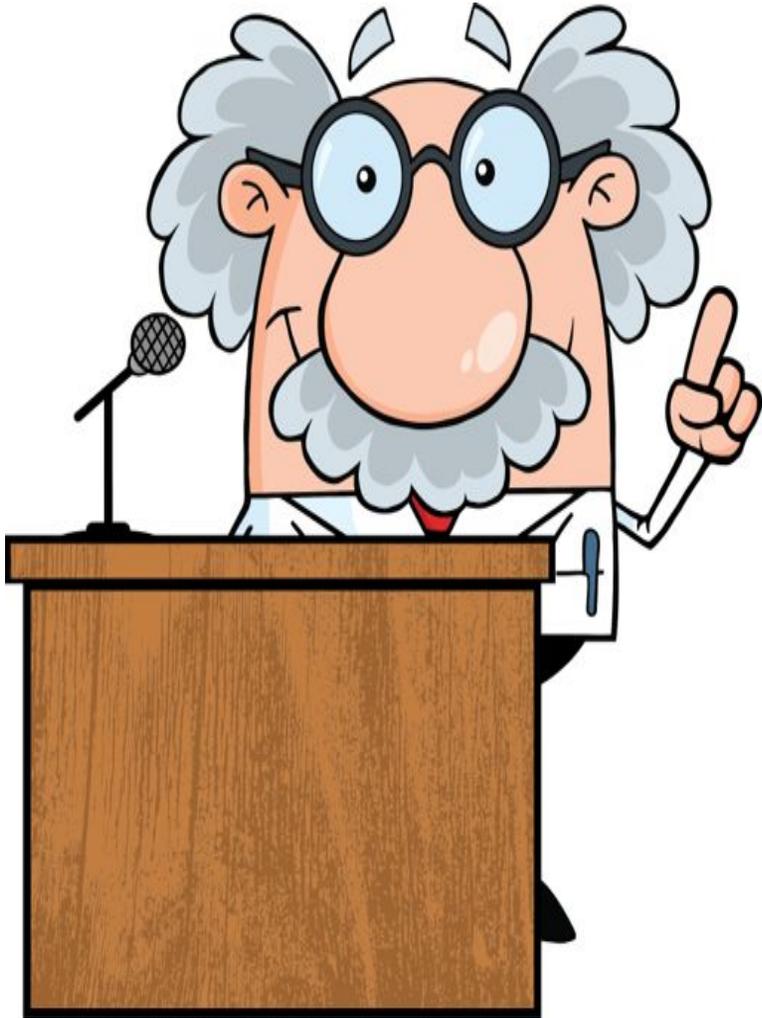


OK, I understand that. Satan lost the war in heaven and he and his crew were cast out. Satan and his minions lost again at Armageddon, and now he's locked up tight in the abyss. But once under lock and key, why in the world would God parole Satan after 1,000 years!



And what's this 1,000 years all about?

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Although some readers understand the 1,000 years to be a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth in a future physical “Millennial Kingdom,” the 1,000 years is better understood as a figurative number for “a long time,” as in “*a thousand years in your eyes are merely a day gone by*” (Psalm 90: 4). We have seen this symbolic or figurative use of numbers throughout Scripture, with its numerous sets of 3s, 7s, 12s and 40s.



But this 1,000 year reign of Christ is perplexing. If we simply read our text on a literal, surface level, it appears that the 1,000 years follow immediately after Christ's victory at Armageddon and the binding of Satan, and they end with the release of Satan, his final rebellion, defeat and demise, bringing history to a close.

Such a reading poses numerous difficulties, however, when we attempt to square it with the rest of Revelation. How, for example, do we understand two resurrections (20: 4, 5)? After a 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth, how could Satan then "deceive the nations" (20: 8) and lead them into rebellion and catastrophe again?

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As we've already seen in our study, Revelation often uses the literary technique of recapitulation, of pausing the linear narrative, turning around, and dropping into an earlier scene for a closer look. We saw this, for example, when we paused our narrative to view the back story of Revelation in Chapters 12-14, and we saw it again in chapters 17-19, a recapitulation that took us to "ground zero," the epicenter of the seventh bowl's impact.



To help us find our way through the tangled thicket of the “Millennial Kingdom,” we might turn to the early Church fathers for guidance.

Some of the fathers—Papias of Hierapolis (c. 70-163), Irenaeus (c. 130-202) and Tertullian (c. 155-240), for example—expected a literal 1,000-year reign, a transformed, Eden-like earthly paradise over which Christ and the saints would rule. This is called millennialism.

Others—Origen (c. 184-253), Dionysius of Alexandria (c. 200-264), and Jerome (c. 347-420)—understood the 1,000 years as allegory, in which Christ triumphed over sin and immorality, vividly portrayed in the imagery and symbolism of Revelation.

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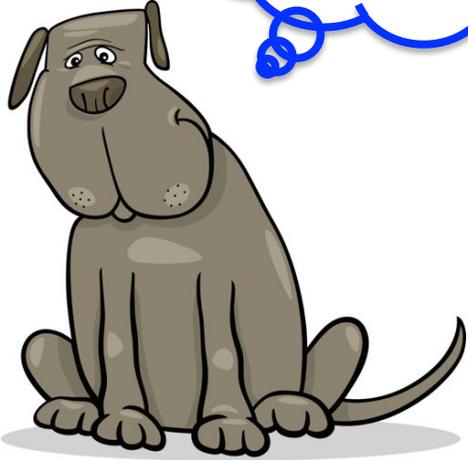
St. Augustine (354-430) took a different—and a very insightful—turn, however, understanding the “millennial kingdom” as starting with Jesus’ first coming and ending with his second, a view called amillennialism.

As Augustine struggled with the paradox of two resurrections, he concluded that the first resurrection is spiritual and occurs in baptism, while the second resurrection is physical and occurs at the end of history. Thus, the Millennial Kingdom is the time in between: the “Age of the Church.”

This is a simple and elegant solution to a complex problem.

A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue trousers. He is leaning against a vertical black line on the left, with his hand on his chin in a thinking pose. A large blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

I can see that! St. Augustine understood the persecution of the Church during its first few centuries, but he also knew that Constantine had signed the Edict of Milan in 313, and he lived to see Theodosius I make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380, when Augustine was 26 years old.

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog with floppy ears, sitting on the ground. A blue thought bubble is connected to its head.

Good point!

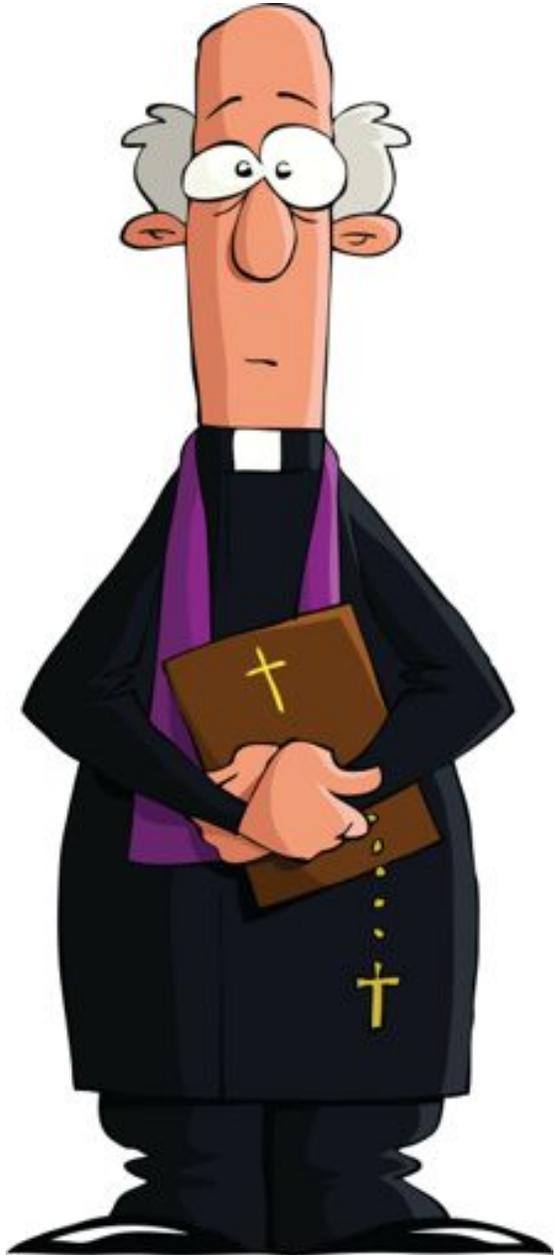
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Of course, none of this implies that the Church on earth is in any way perfect. Quite the contrary! Throughout history the Church has seen its share of rascals and rogues and downright evil men, as well as of saints: one thinks of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13: 24-30.

Our brief span on this earth in the "Church visible" is a mixed blessing, but the "Church" is not only here on earth; the vast majority is the "Church invisible," those believers who have gone before us, those who are already in heaven enjoying the beatific vision in the company of the saints and in the presence of the Lord.

In one sense, we stand today in the *vestibule* of the Church in this life; we fully enter it in the next.



We should note that the Roman Catholic Church rejects millenarianism (a view embraced today by many conservative Evangelicals), the view that expects a literal 1,000-year earthly reign of Christ after the battle of Armageddon and before the final judgment.

She also rejects the idea that Christ's kingdom will come as the result of a secular political process or of a "progressive ascendancy" of the Church . . .

"but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven. God's triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgment after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 677.

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“Then I saw thrones; those who sat on them were entrusted with judgment. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image nor had accepted its mark on their foreheads or hands. They came to life and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were over. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over these; they will reign with him for [the] thousand years.”

(20: 4-6)

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- We now learn what takes place during the 1,000 years that Satan is locked up, brooding and plotting in confinement.
- In heaven John sees thrones, perhaps those of the twenty-four elders who are seated around the throne of God. They are entrusted with judgment.
- With them are the martyrs and all those who had not gone over to the beast. We met the martyrs when the fifth seal was opened, *“the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the witness they bore to the word of God”* (6: 9), and we met the 144,000 *“who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads”* (14: 1), Christ’s army.

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(20: 4-6)

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“First Resurrection,” *Apocalypse* (miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 34v), c. 1370-1390.
British Library, London.

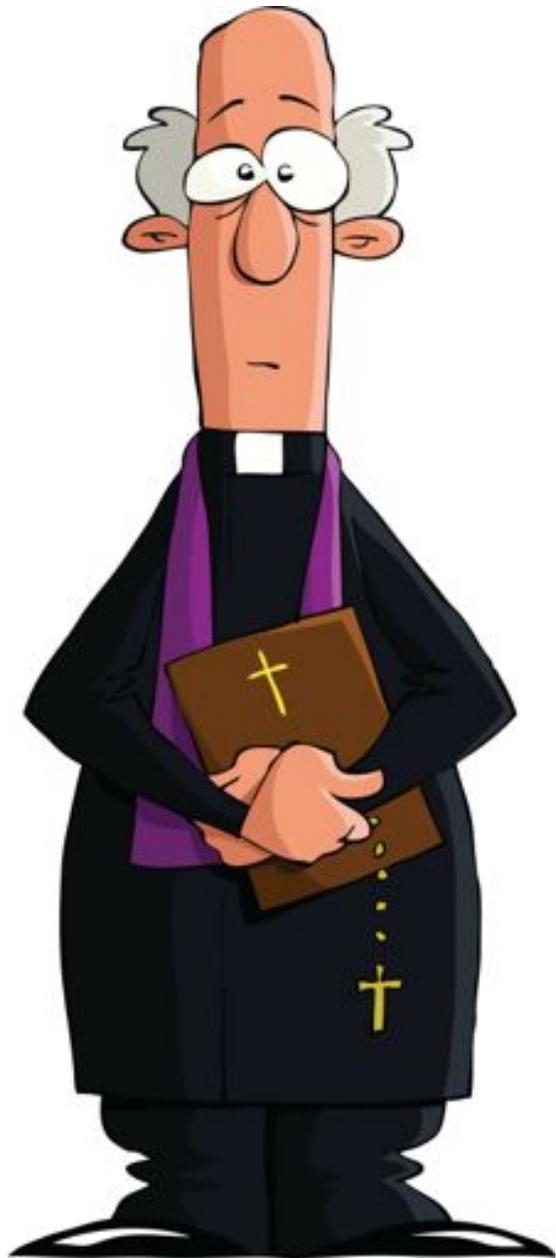
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- The martyrs and those who had not gone over to the beast are resurrected and they reign with Christ for 1,000 years, the entire era of the “Age of the Church.” The scene recalls many others from ancient literature where the son of a king, with his loyal band of followers, engages the enemy in battle, defeats the evil king and his forces, and returns home triumphant, where he reigns, surrounded by his father’s loyal inner circle of advisors, with his wartime “band of brothers” as his friends and companions.

- This is the “**first resurrection.**” Those who are not his “friends” will be resurrected after the 1,000 years are over.

- Those with him in the first resurrection need not fear the “**second death,**” the pool of fire. Their position in heaven is secure.



If we view this scene as taking place during the “Age of the Church,” we see the martyrs and Jesus’ companions as those who have shed their blood for Christ; those who are “born from above” (John 3: 7), baptized believers who belong to him in the “Church visible”; and those who have passed from this life to the next and are present with him in Paradise.

“When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison. He will go out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. They invaded the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the holy ones and the beloved city. But fire came down from heaven and consumed them. The Devil who had led them astray was thrown into the pool of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

(20: 7-10)

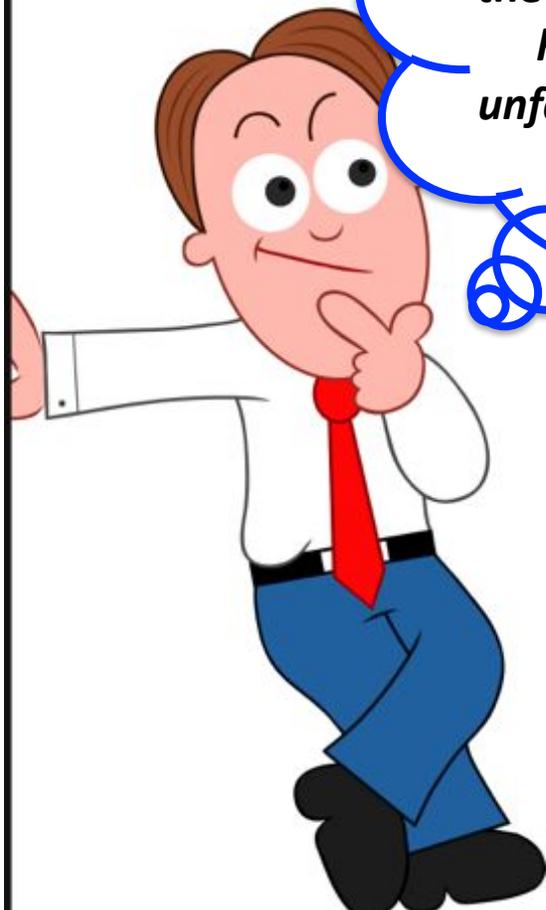
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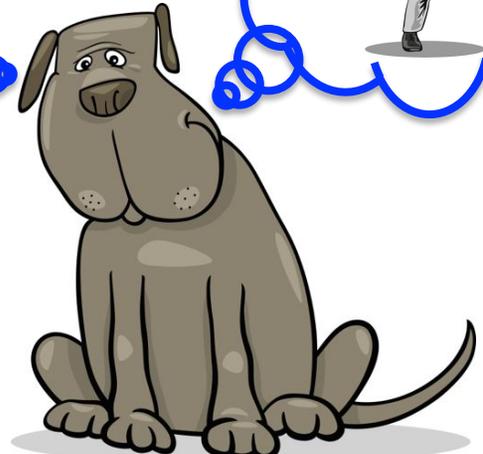
- **“When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison.”** The big question, of course, is: **“Why?”** Satan fought God in the war in heaven, and he lost; he fought God at Armageddon, and he lost; now, he is released from prison, he will fight God again, and he will lose. God knows this, so why does he parole Satan?



I'll tell you why! I never had a chance. The whole system was rigged against me. God set me up from the very beginning. He hated me—ME, the most glorious of all the angels!



No. Satan had three chances, three times to repent, three times to ask God for forgiveness. After his release from the Abyss Satan can never say, *“I didn’t have a chance. I’ve been treated unfairly.”* He had every chance, and he blew them all.



Three strikes and you’re out, Buster!



“When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison. He will go out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. They invaded the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the holy ones and the beloved city. But fire came down from heaven and consumed them. The Devil who had led them astray was thrown into the pool of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

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- Locked in his prison for 1,000 years, Satan’s power has only been diminished, not ended. He has had 1,000 years to brood and to plot his revenge. It’s an obsession.
- He gathers the nations “for battle.” The Greek is εἰς τόν πόλεμον, “for the battle,” the definite article emphasizing its finality.
- Once again John invokes Ezekiel, alluding to Ezekiel 38-39, where Gog, king of Magog, attacks Israel and God hurls fire down upon them, destroying Gog’s army in a flash, feeding their corpses to the birds of the air.
- Satan launches another futile attack on God, again assembling the kings of the earth—who foolishly follow him. They are defeated in the blink of an eye.

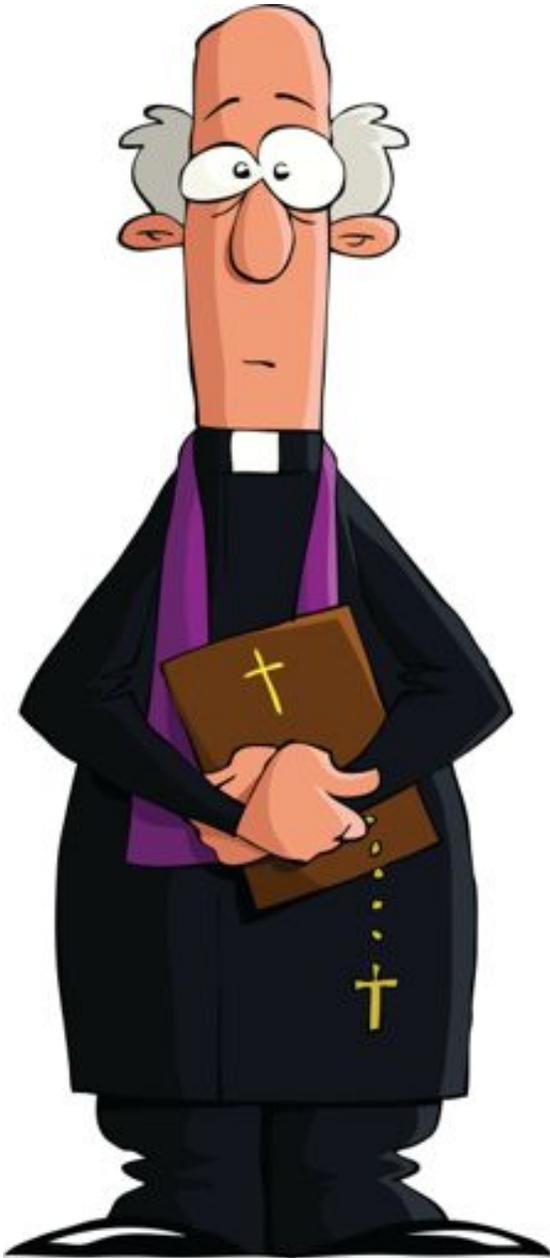
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(20: 7-10)

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He got what he deserves,
roasting in the fires of Hell
for all eternity. Good
riddance!

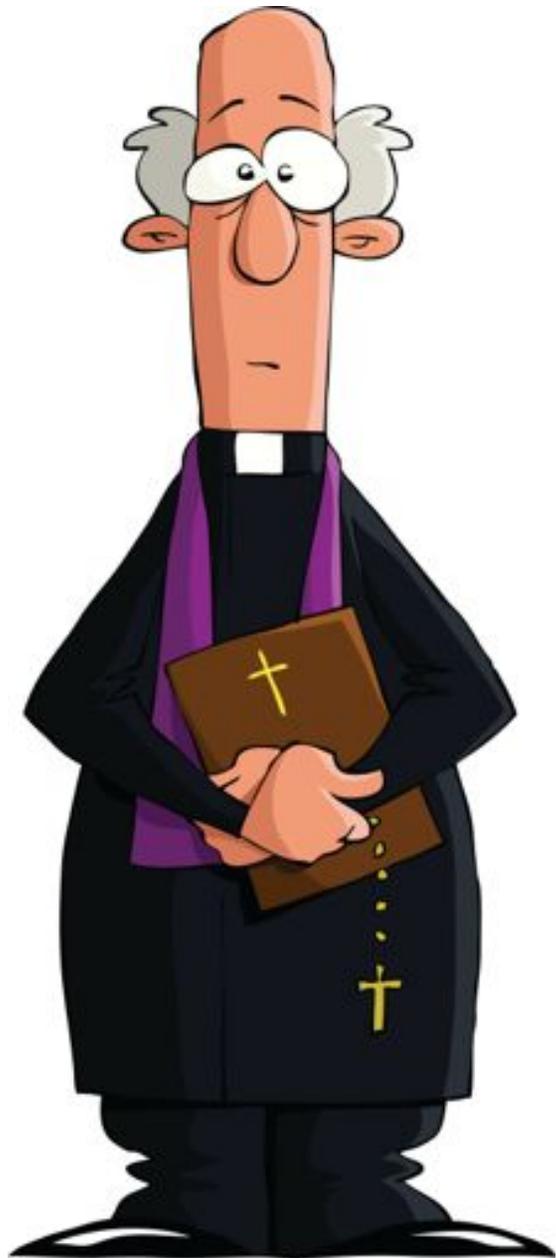


Perhaps. But here's an intriguing thought. If God is love, how could he condemn anyone—even Satan—to eternal punishment, with no possibility of redemption?

Origen (c. 184-253) is the first one to plant this seed of “universal salvation,” including that of Satan:

*“The destruction of the last enemy . . . is to be understood, not as if its substance, which was formed by God, is to perish, but because its mind and hostile will, which came not from God, but from itself, are to be destroyed. Its destruction, therefore, will not be its non-existence, but its ceasing to be an enemy . . .”*¹

¹ *The Writings of Origen*, trans. Frederick Crombie, 2 vols., Ante-Nicene Christian Library (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895), 1: 268.

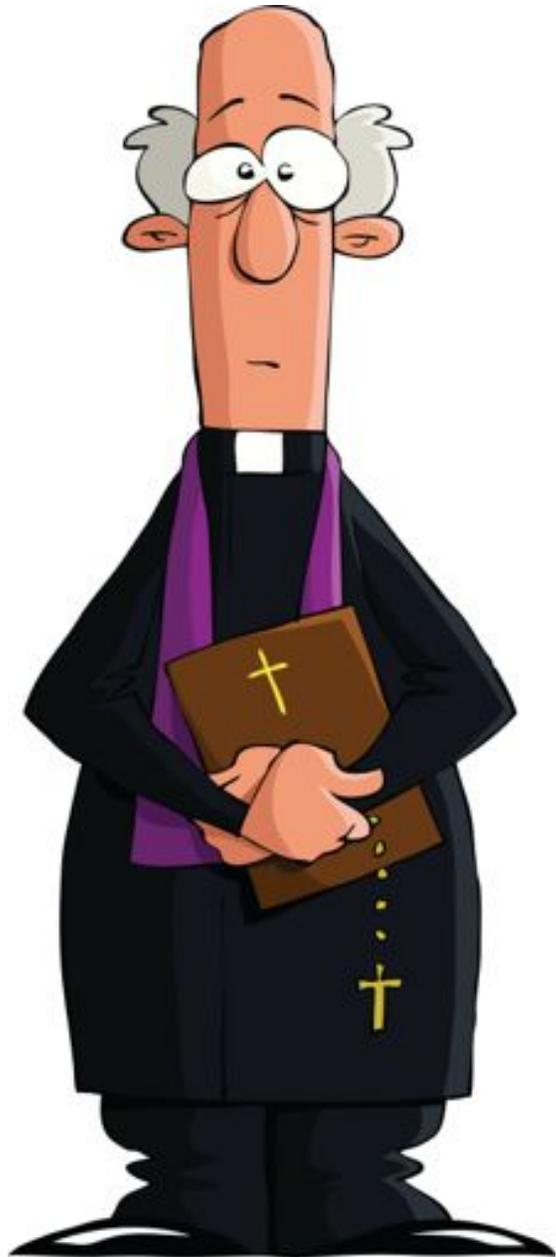


That’s an interesting argument . . . but it’s one that got Origen condemned at the 2nd Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553 and that earned the scorn of both Jerome and Augustine.²

Yet, the argument persisted, reaching full bloom with the Cambridge Platonists of the 17th century who argued that if God’s power *“is nothing but his goodness strongly reaching all things, from height to depth, from the highest heaven to the lowest hell,”* if God is to become *“all in all,”* as the Cambridge Platonists believed, then Satan must be included.³

² C. A. Patrides, “The Salvation of Satan,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28 (1967), pp. 467-478.

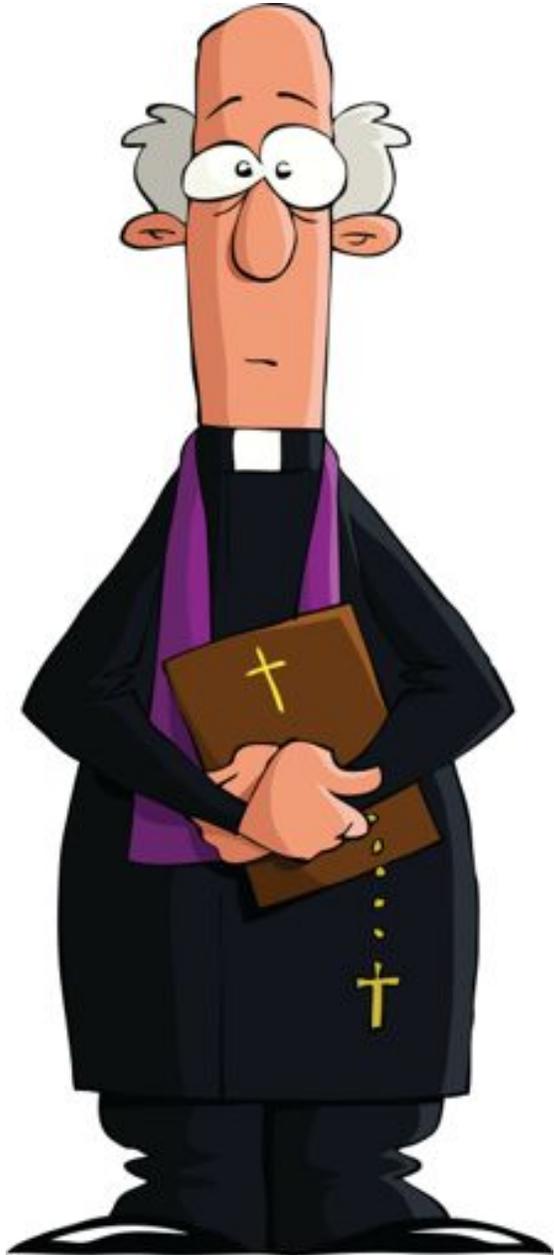
³ Ralph Cudworth, “A Sermon Preached before the House of Commons, at Westminster, March 31, 1647 (Cambridge, 1647)”; reprinted in *The Cambridge Platonists*, pp. 106-107.



This line of thinking influenced many 17th and 18th-century philosophers and theologians, including Barrow and Boyle, Tillotson and Locke, Ray and Shaftesbury, Leibniz and Newton, Berkeley and Kant.

But the opposite view won the day.

John Donne (1572-1631), poet, theologian and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, stated emphatically that *“when the Angels were made, and when they fell, we dispute; but when they shall return, falls not into question”* (Sermons, 5, 86).



Today, the Roman Catholic Church affirms John Donne's position:

"It is the irrevocable character of their choice, and not a defect in the infinite divine mercy, that makes the angels' sin unforgivable. There is no repentance for the angels after their fall, just as there is no repentance for men after death."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 393.

“Next I saw a large white throne and the one who was sitting on it. The earth and the sky fled from his presence and there was no place for them. I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Then another scroll was opened, the book of life. The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls. The sea gave up its dead; then Death and Hades gave up their dead. All the dead were judged according to their deeds. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the pool of fire. (This pool of fire is the second death.) Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the pool of fire.”

(20: 11-15)

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• Now, John sees another vision of “a large white throne and the one who was sitting on it.”

Describing it as μέγας [me'-gahs, “large” or “great”] and λευκός [lyi-kos', “white”] distinguishes this throne from the ones belonging to the twenty-four elders.

• We are not told who is sitting on the throne, which appears to be God’s throne, but we might rightly infer that it is Jesus, for in John’s gospel we are told:

“For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life to whomever he wishes. Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to his Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.”

(5: 21-23)

“Next I saw a large white throne and the one who was sitting on it. The earth and the sky fled from his presence and there was no place for them. I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Then another scroll was opened, the book of life. The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls. The sea gave up its dead; then Death and Hades gave up their dead. All the dead were judged according to their deeds. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the pool of fire. (This pool of fire is the second death.) Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the pool of fire.”

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“Books Are Opened,” *Apocalypse* (miniature illumination, Yates Thompson MS 10, fol. 35r), c. 1370-1390. British Library, London.

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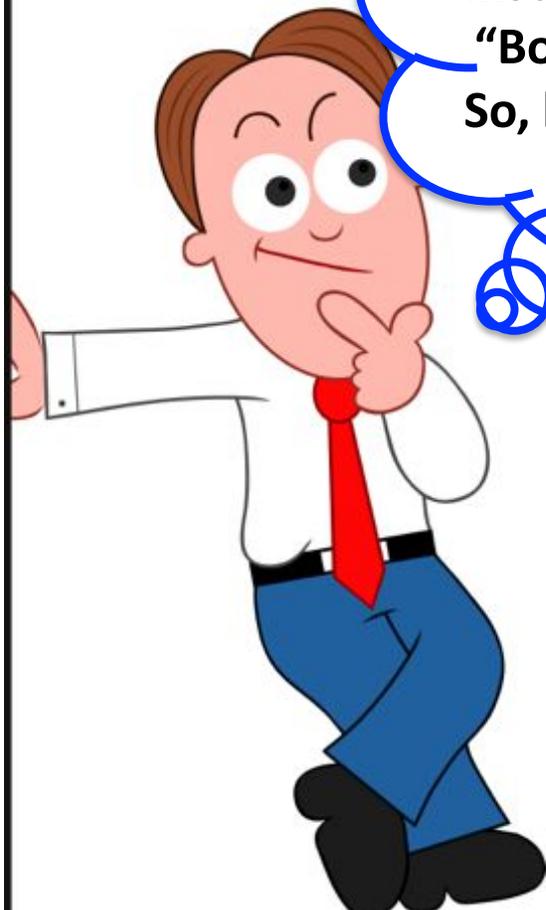
•Notice that now ALL the dead are raised: 1) the martyrs and those who bore the names of God and the Lamb who were raised in 20: 4 and have reigned with Christ as his companions during the 1,000-year “Millennial Kingdom”; and 2) those who are raised now, those allied with Satan and his crew who bore the number 666.

•The latter have their names written in βιβλία [bee-blee’-a, “books” plural]; the former have their names written in a βιβλίον [“book” singular], the “book of life.” This suggests there are far more names written in the “books” than there are in the singular “book of life,” recalling Jesus saying:

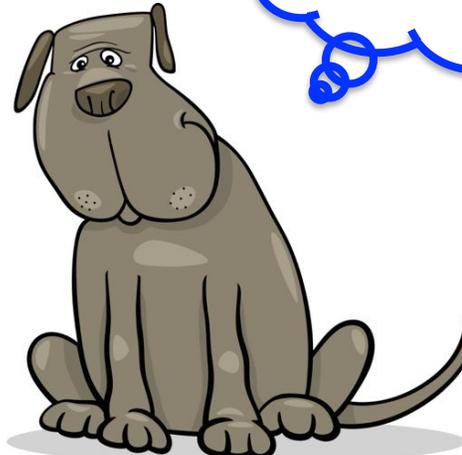
“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few.”

(Matthew 7: 13-14)

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We are approaching the “Last Judgment” scene in Revelation, but notice that the names are *already* inscribed in the two sets of books, the “Book of Life” and the “other books.” So, how do the names get there in the first place?

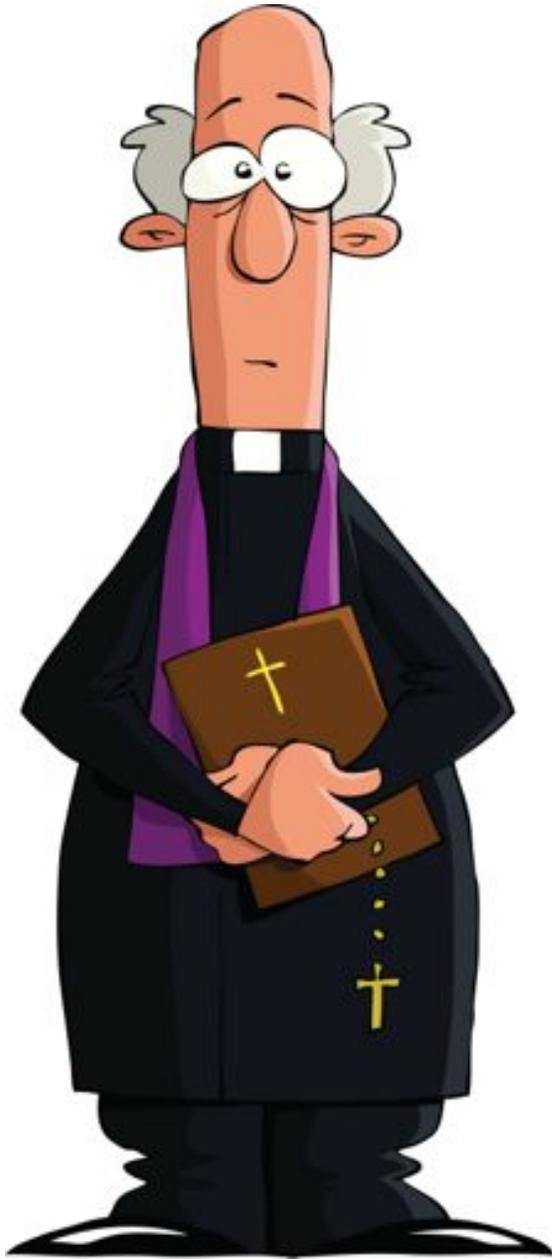


I hope I’m in the “Book of Life!”



Me, too!

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Being in the “Book of Life” or being in the “other books”—that is, being among the redeemed or being among the lost—is not a matter of God’s judgment, not a matter of reward or punishment; it is a matter of our individual choice in this life.

If we choose to respond to God’s grace through faith in his Son, then our sins are forgiven and we move from the world into the family of God, the Church. Conversely, if we refuse God’s gift of grace, and if we adamantly and steadfastly refuse his freely-given gift of redemption, then we remain in the world, outside the family of God. As John tells us in his gospel:

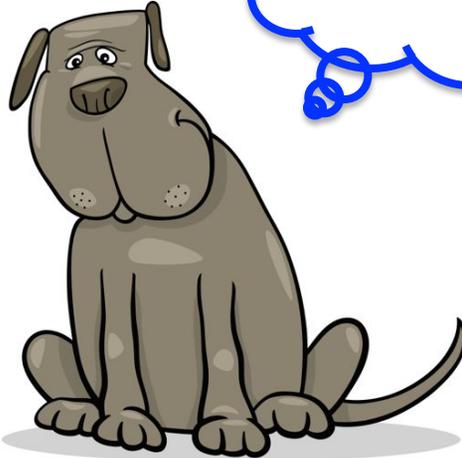
“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him.”

(3: 36)

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I see! So, what is the
Last Judgment all
about, then?



I think I know!



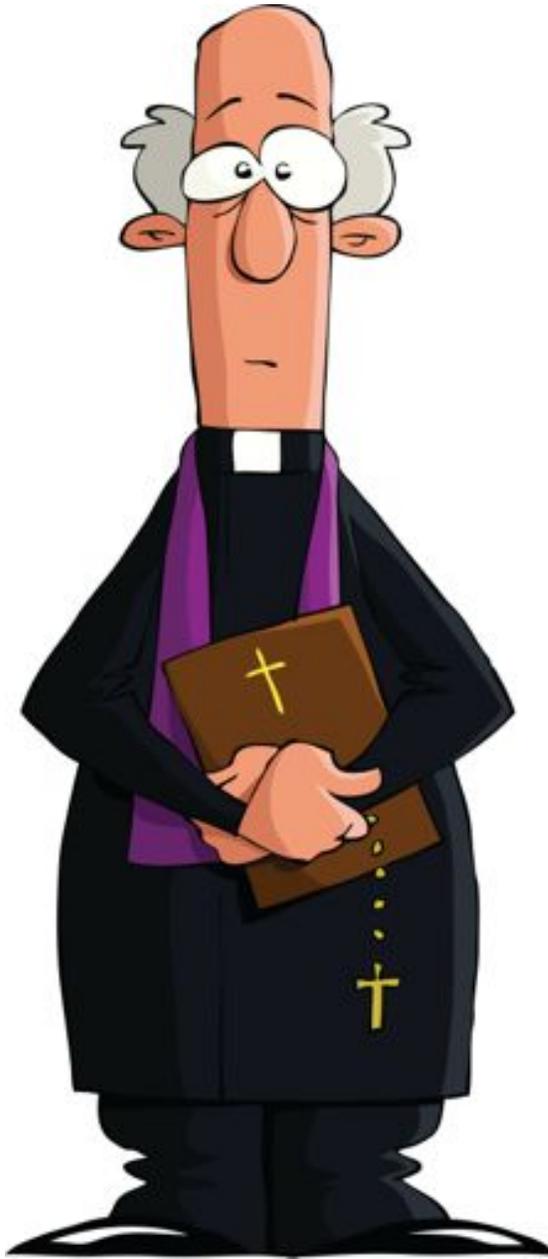
Me, too. I'm
outta here!

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“Next I saw a large white throne and the one who was sitting on it. The earth and the sky fled from his presence and there was no place for them. I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Then another scroll was opened, the book of life. The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls. The sea gave up its dead; then Death and Hades gave up their dead. All the dead were judged according to their deeds. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the pool of fire. (This pool of fire is the second death.) Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the pool of fire.”

(20: 11-15)

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The Last Judgment doesn't determine whether you are in heaven or hell, for you have already decided that; rather, it determines your position in heaven or hell.

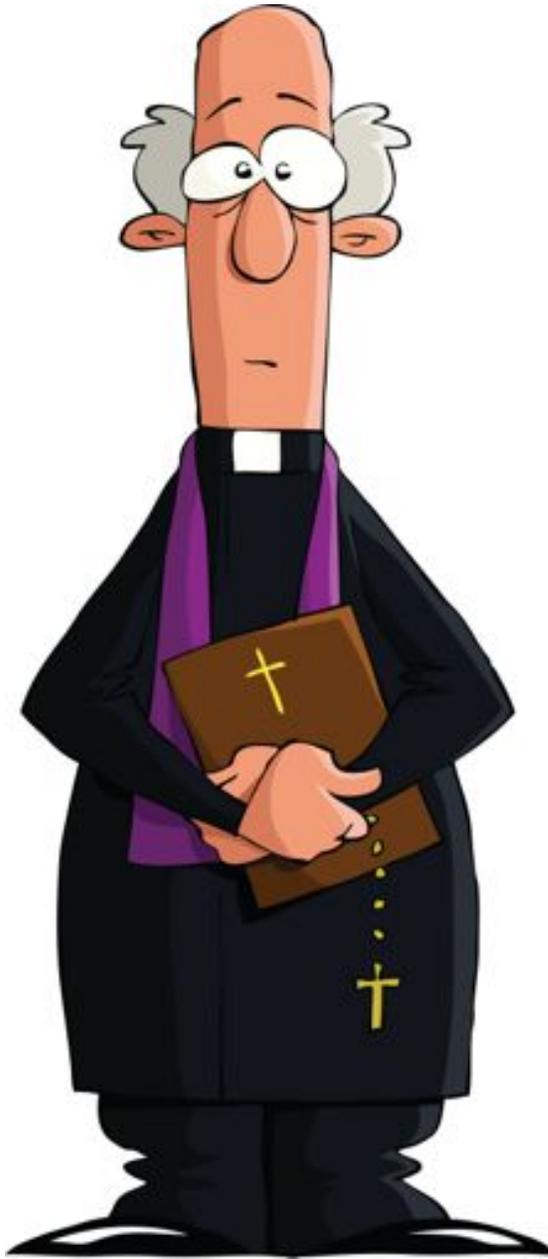
Dante illustrates the concept best in his *Divine Comedy*. Dante's hell (the *Inferno*) consists of nine concentric circles, each one deeper within the bowels of the earth, and each one residence for those whose lives are defined by increasingly serious sins:

1. Limbo (the abode of virtuous pagans)
2. Lust
3. Gluttony
4. Greed
5. Wrath
6. Heresy
7. Violence
8. Fraud
9. Treachery



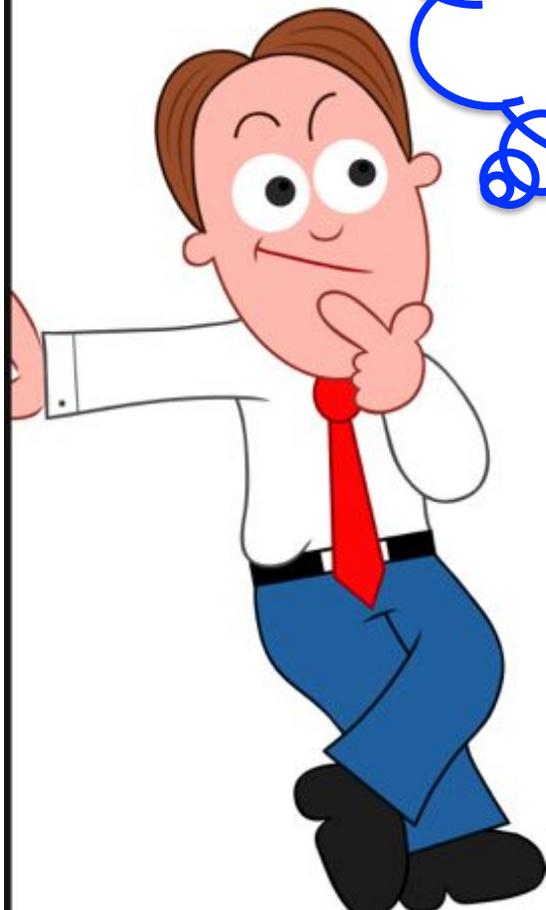
Sandro Botticelli. "Inferno, Canto XVIII," (colored drawing on parchment), c. 1485.
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

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Conversely, Dante's paradise (the *Paradiso*) consists of nine ascending spheres, each one drawing closer to the presence of God, and each one residence for those whose lives are defined by increasingly virtuous lives:

- 1. The Moon (The Inconstant)**
- 2. Mercury (The Ambitious)**
- 3. Venus (The Lovers)**
- 4. The Sun (The Wise)**
- 5. Mars (The Warriors of the Faith)**
- 6. Jupiter (The Just Rulers)**
- 7. Saturn (The Contemplatives)**
- 8. The Fixed Stars (Faith, Hope and Love)**
- 9. The Primum Mobile (The Angels)**



I see! So St. Francis and Mother Teresa will have a higher place in heaven than I will. That seems fair enough!

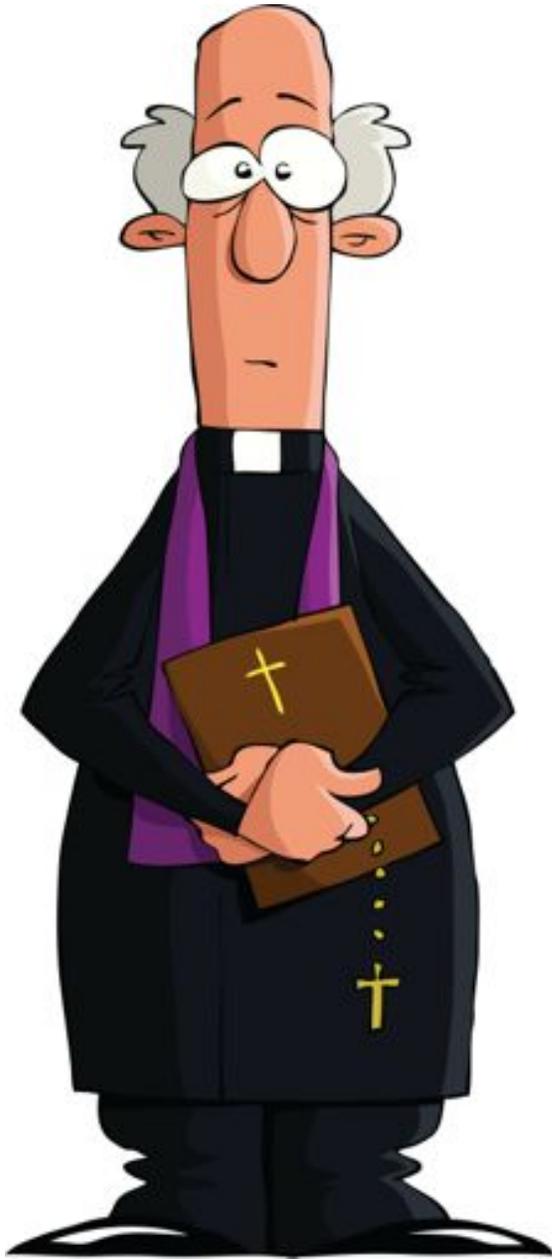


I don't care what position I have, as long as I'm there!



Me, too!

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Of course, we'd be remiss if we closed this lesson without seeing Michelangelo's "The Last Judgment" fresco on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City.

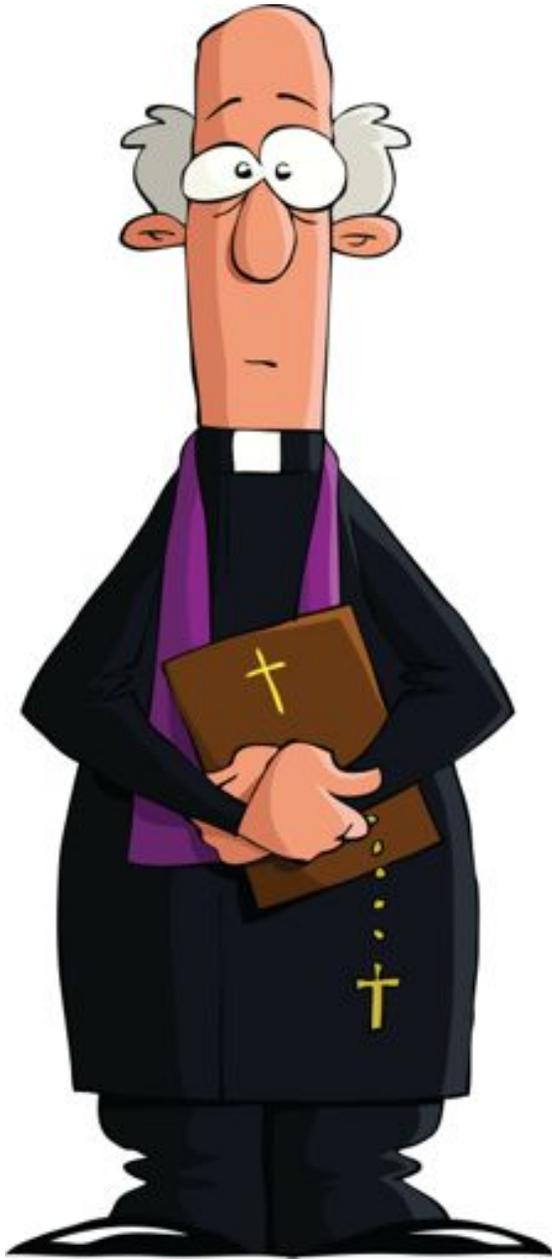
Commissioned by Pope Clement VII in 1534, the original subject was to be the resurrection, but with the Pope's death, his successor, Pope Paul III, requested a "Last Judgment" scene.

Michelangelo spent much of 1535 preparing the wall, and he completed the work in four years, 1536-1541.



Michelangelo. "The Last Judgment," (fresco), 1536-1541.
Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

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The fresco was not well received. The Pope's Master of Ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena, complained that *"it was mostly disgraceful that in so sacred a place there should have been depicted all those nude figures, exposing themselves so shamefully,"* observing that it was more fit *"for the public baths and taverns"* than for the papal chapel.

Michelangelo responded by including Cesena's face on the figure of Minos, judge of the underworld, wearing asses ears, with a snake coiled about him biting his penis.

When Cesena complained, the Pope laughingly replied that his jurisdiction did not extend into hell!



**Biagio da Cesena,
Michelangelo's critic,
wearing asses ears with
a snake coiled around
him, biting his . . .**

Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why does God lock Satan up for “1,000 years,” rather than simply tossing him into the pool of fire, along with the beast and the false prophet?
2. Satan is taken “off the board,” but his influence is still felt in the world. What are some examples of Satan’s influence today?
3. What is the first resurrection?
4. What is the second resurrection?
5. How do you know if your name is in the “book of Life” or in the “other books”?

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