

RETHINKING THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF PERISHING

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Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

I. INTRODUCTION

What did Peter mean when he wrote, “The Lord is...not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9)?

What did the Lord Jesus mean when He said, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3)?

In the NT the concept of perishing is often tied to a failure to repent. That is, repentance is required to avoid perishing, whatever that is.

We will first consider the popular understanding of perishing in the NT. Then we will see that the popular understanding does not correspond to the data. The NT uses of *apollumi* show that it mainly refers to physical death and destruction, not to eternal condemnation. Then we consider the practical ramifications of a proper understanding of *apollumi* in the NT.

II. THE POPULAR IMPRESSION: *APOLLUMI* REFERS TO ETERNAL CONDEMNATION MOST OF THE TIME

Scholars as well as laypeople believe that perishing in the NT most often refers to eternal condemnation. Thus there really is no question about what Peter means in 2 Pet 3:9. Unless people repent, they will end up in the lake of fire forever. Likewise in Luke 13:3 the Lord was

obviously saying that unless his Jewish listeners repented, they would all likewise be eternally condemned.

Commenting on 2 Pet 3:9, Green writes, “God does not want any man to perish: he wants all men to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).”¹

Similarly, Kelly assumes the understanding of perishing in 2 Pet 3:9 when he writes:

The truth that God desires the **repentance** and conversion of all men was perceived by the post-exilic prophets and later Judaism (e.g. [sic] Ezek. 18:23; 33:11: for rabbinical material, see SB III, 774f.);...in the NT it is set out or implied in John 3:16f.; Rom. 11:32; 1 Tim. 2:4...[Peter] enables the Church to understand its mission as being, in this span between the resurrection and the Second Coming, to proclaim the divine love and lead men to repentance and faith.²

It is not common to find commentators on 2 Pet 3:9 even mentioning the possibility that perishing there refers to premature physical death. Since the only other use of *perish* (*apollumi*) in the epistle clearly refers to premature physical death (2 Pet 3:6), it makes sense that commentators would at least *consider* that *apollumi* might carry the same meaning just three verses later.

However, commentators *do* mention the possibility of perishing referring to physical death in Luke 13:3, 5, even though most end up concluding that eternal condemnation is in view there as well.

Commenting on Luke 13:3, Pate sees perishing as a reference to eternal condemnation, though he recognizes that physical death at the hands of the Romans might possibly be in view: “The reference is to spiritual judgment before God, not necessarily a life shortened by tragedy.”³ On v 5 he likewise adds, “Although it is possible that

Jesus anticipates the coming fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 with these words, they more probably refer, once again, to judgment before God.”⁴

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on repentance as a condition for salvation in the NT. My advisor, Zane Hodges, suggested to me at the time that Luke 13:3, 5 might indeed refer to the Jewish Wars and the fall of Jerusalem in which over one million Jews died. I found five commentators who at that time advocated that position.⁵ However, like Pate and many others, the traditional understanding of *apollumi* was so strong that I rejected that view and stuck with the eternal condemnation understanding. Like Pate, I did mention and dismiss the possibility that death at the hands of the Romans might be in view.⁶

In a chapter dealing with Luke’s understanding of the condition of eternal life (entitled, “What Must I Do to Be Saved?”), Marshall cites Luke 13:3, 5 as showing that “alongside faith repentance is an important factor in conversion.”⁷ He too takes it for granted that perishing in Luke 13:3, 5 refer to eternal condemnation.

Matthew Henry joins the chorus with his comments on Luke 13:3-5:

Some lay an emphasis on the word *likewise*, and apply it to the destruction that was coming upon the people of the Jews, and particularly upon Jerusalem, who were destroyed by the Romans at the time of their Passover, and so, like the Galileans, they had *their blood mingled with their sacrifices*; and many of them, both in Jerusalem and in other places, were destroyed by the fall of walls and buildings which were battered down about their ears, as those that died by the fall of the tower of Siloam. But certainly it

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Robert N. Wilkin, “Repentance As a Condition for Salvation in the New Testament,” Unpublished Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985, 49, n 1.

⁶ Ibid. See esp. n 3.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 193.

¹ Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, Tyndale NT Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 148.

² J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 363.

³ C. Marvin Pate, *Luke* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 284.

looks further; except we repent, we shall perish eternally, as they perished out of this world.⁸

Famed pastor and theologian John Piper, discussing perishing in Luke 13:3, 5, says:

“Unless you repent you will all likewise PERISH.” Now what does “perish” mean? Sometimes the word simply means die in the sense that we all will die physically. But that would not fit here since Jesus implies that if we repent, we will not perish. “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” If you DO repent, you won’t perish. So perish is something more than simply die a physical death.

Here’s what I think it means. Since Jesus connects it directly to sin and since he says it can be escaped by repentance, I take it to mean final judgment. He is referring to something beyond death. Those Galileans were taken unawares and experienced a horrible end. Unless you repent, you too will be taken unawares and experience a horrible end—the judgment of God beyond the grave.⁹

Let’s now consider the NT evidence based on usage. It reveals a different picture.

III. THE ACTUAL SITUATION: APOLLUMI RARELY REFERS TO ETERNAL CONDEMNATION

The Greek word *apollumi*, which is often translated as *perish*, occurs 92 times in the Greek NT. A study of those uses reveals a much different picture than is commonly thought of what perishing refers to in the NT.

⁸Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, s.v. Luke 13:3-5.

⁹The message is entitled, “Unless You Repent You Will All Likewise Perish.” It is available at the Desiring God website at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/unless-you-repent-you-will-all-likewise-perish>. Accessed September 20, 2010.

A. JOHN 3:16 IS NOT A TYPICAL USE OF THE WORD *PERISH*

John 3:16 is a beloved verse. Even many people who haven’t been to church in decades know it by heart. Its message is marvelous. However, John 3:16 actually misleads people about the meaning of *perish* (*apollumi*) in the NT, since many assume that the meaning of *apollumi* in John 3:16 is the meaning, or the primary meaning, it has in the entire NT.

It is true that the word *perish* in John 3:16 means *to be eternally condemned*. This is clear both in v 16, where it is contrasted with having eternal life, and in vv 17 and 18, where it is identified as being condemned.

However, it is a major error to assume that because a word is used one way in one place in the NT that it always or typically carries that meaning. There are, admittedly, a few words that always carry the same meaning throughout the NT. We say that these words have *technical meanings*. That is, every time they mean exactly the same thing.

There are very few such words and *perish* (*apollumi*) is not one of those rare words. In fact, the meaning that *apollumi* has in John 3:16 is actually quite rare.

Apollumi in the NT most often refers to physical death or to temporal destruction or loss.

B. PHYSICAL DEATH IS THE MOST COMMON MEANING (33 OF 92 = 36%)

By my study 33 of the 92 uses of *apollumi* in the NT refer to physical death, making it the single most common meaning. We can easily see that this word often refers to physical death by looking at some of the passages in which it occurs.

Matthew 8:25. “Lord, save us! *We are perishing*.” The context is that the disciples were in a “boat that was covered with the waves” during “a great tempest.” The

disciples feared physical death here, not hell. Without the Lord's intervention they would have soon died.

Acts 5:37. Judas of Galilee "also perished." The word *also* points the reader back to the previous verse where Gamaliel is reported to have said that Theudas "was slain." Clearly the perishing in verse 37 is parallel to being killed or slain in verse 36. Gamaliel wasn't making any comment on the eternal destiny of either man.

1 Corinthians 10:9-10. During the forty years in the wilderness some "*were destroyed* by serpents" (10:9) and "some of them also complained and *were destroyed* by the destroyer" (10:10). Here are two uses of the Greek word *apollumi* where the destruction in view is clearly physical death. A comparison with Exodus shows that physical death is in view here.

Jude 11. Here the Lord's half-brother speaks of those who "*perished* in the rebellion of Korah." He is alluding to Numbers 16:1-35 and the death of a group of 250 who were descendants of Korah. Again, physical death is in view.

John 11:50. Here Caiaphas makes an unwitting prophecy about the death of Jesus for the nation. He said, "It is expedient for us that one man [= Jesus] should die for the people, and not that the whole nation *should perish*." Clearly the options are one person dying versus the whole nation dying. Caiaphas feared that Rome would kill the nation, or at least most of it, if Jesus was allowed to live. The ironic truth is that by killing Jesus Caiaphas and the others brought on the death of over a million Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the Jewish wars 35 years after Calvary.

John 18:14. John here reminds the readers of the Fourth Gospel that Caiaphas had said "that it was expedient that one man *should die* for the people." It is a bit misleading to translate *apollumi* as *should die* here and yet *perish* in the parallel context in John 11:50, using the same word.

Matthew 2:13. Joseph was warned in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt "for Herod will seek the young

child *to destroy* Him." Again, the word is *apollumi* and it refers to physical death. Herod wished to destroy Jesus in the sense that he wanted to kill Him.

Luke 11:51. The Lord Jesus spoke of the blood of the prophets which was shed "from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah *who perished* between the altar and the temple." Zechariah was stoned with stones in the court of the house of God (2 Chron 24:20-21). The next verse makes it clear that he was killed: "Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness which Jehoiada his father had done to him, but killed his son [Zechariah]; and as he died, he said, 'The Lord look on it, and repay!'" (2 Chron 24:22). The Lord Jesus was speaking of the death of Zechariah and the death of Abel. Their eternal destiny was not being considered.

Luke 13:3, 5. Here is another widely misunderstood passage. Some men came to Jesus and "told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1). In other words, they were asking Jesus about people from Galilee whom Pilate had killed. It is important to remember the question that leads to Jesus' response. The question concerns physical death, not eternal condemnation.

Jesus then asked if they thought "that these Galileans were worse sinners than all *other* Galileans, because they suffered these things?" (verse 2). Not waiting for their reply, Jesus answers His own question: "I tell you no" (verse 3a). Then He goes on to say, "But unless you repent, *you will* all likewise *perish*."

The word *likewise* here is crucial. The Galileans were killed. Thus Jesus is saying that if the Jews hearing His words did not repent, they would be killed as well. It is crystal clear that *perish* here refers to physical death.

The Lord then tells of 18 people who died when a tower in Siloam fell on them. Again, physical death, not eternal condemnation is in view. This is followed by repeating the words of v 3. Unless the listeners repented, they too would perish, meaning, they too would be killed.

This statement was fulfilled in AD 66-70 when over a million Jews were killed during the Jewish wars.¹⁰

Morris comments:

His *likewise* can scarcely mean that they will be killed in exactly the same way. Perhaps the thought is that the manner of the death of the Galileans gave them no time to repent. Jesus' unrepentant sinners were setting themselves on a course which meant unrepentant death in due course. Or the point may be the execution by the Romans. Unless his hearers repented they would likewise suffer at the hands of the Romans.¹¹

Luke 15:17. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the prodigal, when he realized how bad off he had it in the far country away from his father said to himself, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and *I perish* with hunger!" He is referring to being exceedingly hungry. Possibly his condition was so bad that he realized that eventually he would have literally died if he did not have relief. Or maybe he is simply speaking metaphorically. But clearly in view is that he is in much worse shape here than he would be if he were back with his father.

Luke 17:27, 29. Concerning the deadly effects of the flood in Noah's day the Lord Jesus said, "The day that Noah entered the ark...the flood came and *destroyed* them all." Similarly, concerning the deaths that God brought upon the sin-laden cities of Sodom and Gomorrah He said, "On the day Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and

brimstone from heaven *and destroyed* them all." These two uses clearly refer to physical death.

Luke 20:16. Jesus told a parable about a group of wicked men who were tending a man's vineyard for him. When the time of harvest came, the man sent a servant to get some of the grapes, but the wicked men beat the servant and sent him away with nothing. After this scene was repeated with several servants in succession, the owner sent his beloved son, a clear allusion to Jesus Himself. The wicked men then killed him! Jesus then said, "He will come and *destroy* those vinedressers and give the vineyard to others." The destruction here could look at temporal destruction less than death (the next category), but it is more likely that physical death is in view. Verse 16 likely refers to the Jewish wars and the death of over a million Jews (as well as the destruction of the temple and much of Jerusalem). Of course it also alludes to the birth of the church, the new group to whom the vineyard would be given.

Second Peter 3:6. Referring to the flood Peter says, "The world that then existed [at the time of the flood] *perished*, being flooded with water." Clearly this refers to the destruction of all life, human and animal, on the face of the earth during the Noahic flood. The issue Peter is addressing is not the eternal destiny of those who died. There were likely people who died in the flood who had been believers for years before it and others who came to faith after it started. But they all *perished*, that is, they all died, in the flood. Compare this with 1 Pet 3:20 where Peter indicates that eight souls (Noah and his three sons and all their spouses) *were saved through water*. That *salvation* referred to escaping death, not to being born again. Likewise, the rest of the people *perished* in the sense that they died.

Second Peter 3:9 uses *apollumi* in the same way. However, since this verse is so widely understood as referring to eternal condemnation, I have reserved an entire section below to discuss this verse.

¹⁰ We should not press Jesus' words to mean that 100% of those listening to him would be killed if they didn't repent. He was speaking to the group before Him as representatives of the nation. He was saying that they had a chance to repent. If they did, and, of course, if this was combined with national faith in Him, then the Kingdom would have come for that generation. However, since that generation rejected His offer of the Kingdom and the reoffers of the Kingdom by the apostles, then the nation was going to be destroyed and there would be widespread death. Of course, the destruction was not total since a remnant had to remain so that when Jesus returns there will be a nation of Israel which indeed will repent and believe in Him.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974, 1988), 242-43.

We could look at all of the remaining places in which *apollumi* looks at physical death,¹² but since they follow the same pattern we've already seen, let's consider the second leading category, temporal loss or temporal destruction.

C. TEMPORAL LOSS OR DESTRUCTION IS ANOTHER VERY COMMON MEANING (23 OF 92 = 25%)

Of the 92 uses of *apollumi* in the NT, 23 refer to temporal loss or destruction. Now there is some overlap between this category and the category I call losing the life or being lost in a temporal sense.

John 6:12. After feeding 5,000 men plus their families with a few fish and loaves, the Lord Jesus said to His disciples, "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing *is lost*." This too is the word *apollumi*. It doesn't refer to lie after death, but to being wasted here and now.

Matthew 9:17 (and Mark 2:22 and Luke 5:37). If new wine is put in old wineskins, the wineskins break "and *are ruined*." That is, the wineskins are destroyed. The opposite which the Lord states in this same verse is that if you put new wine in new wineskins, "both are preserved."

Luke 21:18. "But not a hair of your head *shall be lost*." The Lord is promising the disciples and all who suffer for Him that He will protect them, not in the sense that they wouldn't be put to death, for some would, but in the sense that they would have ultimate restoration of all for which they suffer. Not one hair would be lost in service for Christ for which there would be not reward in the life to come.

Romans 14:15. In this weaker brother/stronger brother discussion Paul warns the stronger brother, "*Do not destroy* with your food the one for whom Christ died." The sense of *apollumi* here is *ruin, injure, hurt, or damage*.

1 Corinthians 15:18. Here is an unusual usage. Paul says that if Christ is not risen from the dead, "Then also those who have fallen asleep [died] in Christ *have*

perished." Here *apollumi* refers not to physical death, but to a loss of physical existence.¹³ With no resurrection, believers who have died have permanently lost their bodies, never to regain them again. If there is no resurrection from the dead, then believers who have died will not take part physically in Jesus' coming Kingdom. Of course, that's because He won't either, since there won't be a coming Kingdom if Jesus is not risen. The entire Christian faith is overthrown if Jesus is not raised and if He doesn't raise those who believe in Him.

It is interesting to see how commentators explain this verse. Several think that Paul is speaking of eternal condemnation, which wouldn't make sense, for if Christ is not risen then there is no physical existence beyond the grave. Remember that eternal condemnation is a physical existence too. See Rev 20:11-15. The unsaved dead will be raised before they are judged at the Great White Throne Judgment and then cast into the lake of fire.

1 Peter 1:7. This is the only use of *apollumi* in Peter's first epistle (along with two in Second Peter). Peter says that our faith is "much more precious than gold *that perishes*." Peter means that gold is temporary. Gold will ultimately be destroyed. In the final meltdown after the Millennium, gold and everything in the universe will be burned up (2 Pet 3:10-11).

2 John 8. The Apostle John urges his readers to abide in the doctrine of Christ (v 9) so the apostles *do not lose* those things that they worked for, but that they may receive a full reward (at the *Bēma*). *Apollumi* here refers to loss of potential rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ. If people who are discipled continue with the Lord, then the one who trained them will have a greater reward at the *Bēma* than if those people do not continue with the

¹³Hypothetically this could refer to eternal condemnation. However, in NT thought eternal condemnation is physical since all unbelievers will be resurrected before being condemned (Rev 20:11-15). Besides, following Paul's argument, if Jesus was not raised physically, then there will be no literal Kingdom, no rewards, and no *Bēma*. It is thus unreasonable to conclude that Paul has eternal condemnation in mind here.

¹²See also Matt 12:14; 21:41; 22:7; 26:52; 27:20; Mark 3:6; 4:38; 9:22; 11:18; 12:9; Luke 6:9; 8:24; 13:33; 19:47; Jas 4:12; and Jude 5.

Lord. In a sense disciples get a cut of the rewards of the disciples.

Matthew 5:29-30. Jesus says in v 29 that if something we see causes us to sin, then we should stop looking at it, “for it is more profitable for you that one of your members [i.e., your right eye] *perish*, than for your whole body to be cast into hell [Gehenna].” Leaving aside for a moment the reference to Gehenna,¹⁴ it is clear that *perish* refers to the loss of something precious to us, an eye. Similarly in v 30 the Lord says that if something we do (with the hand referring figuratively to what we do) causes us to sin, then we should stop doing it, “for it is more profitable for you that one of your members [i.e., your right hand] *perish*, than for your whole body to be cast into hell [Gehenna].” Again, *perish* refers to temporal loss, in this case of a hand.

Other uses of *apollumi* that refer to temporal loss include Matt 10:28; Mark 1:24;¹⁵ 2:22; Luke 4:34;¹⁶ 5:37; 9:56; John 6:27; 10:10; 1 Cor 1:19; 8:11; 2 Cor 4:9; and Heb 1:11.

¹⁴ Clearly the Lord isn't contradiction what He said in John 3:16 and many other texts (e.g., John 4:14; 5:24; 6:35; 11:26). He likely means one of two things. First, if eternal torment in the lake of fire is meant, then He is saying that if there is something which is keeping a person from believing in Him for eternal life, then he should abandon that thing. Some people cling to drugs and never go to church to hear the saving message and never listen if a person tries to evangelize them. Others are so addicted to video games or pornography or television or the internet that they never go to church or listen to people trying to witness to them. Better to lose those things than go to hell. Second, the word used here is not Hades, but Gehenna. Hades is the normal NT word for hell. Gehenna was a dump outside of Jerusalem where trash was continually burned. This is understood by some, such as Jody Dillow, to be a reference to *temporal judgment*. Thus the Lord might be warning that if something we see or do causes us to sin, it is better to lose that thing than to fall under God's temporal judgment.

¹⁵ A demon-possessed man in the synagogue in Capernaum said to Jesus, “Did you come to *destroy* us.” What the demons fear is being cast into torment prematurely. They know that one day they will be tormented forever (cf. Matt 8:29). The fear of the demons that possess this man is that they will enter into torment earlier than necessary. Hence this is a form of *temporal judgment* for demons.

¹⁶ Luke 4:34 is parallel to Mark 1:24. See comments in the previous note.

D. LOSING ONE'S LIFE (*PSYCHĒ*) (14 OF 92 = 15%)

The Lord Jesus on a number of occasions taught about *the saving of the psychē*, often translated as *saving the life* or *saving the soul*. Jesus laid out two options: saving your life or losing your life. The word translated *losing* is *apollumi*.

Matthew 16:25. Here, in a passage about discipleship, about following Christ, the Lord Jesus makes this puzzling statement, “Whoever desires to save his life [*psychē*] *will lose* [*apolesei*, from *apollumi*] *it*, and whoever *loses* [*apolesē*, from *apollumi*] his life [*psychē*] for My sake will find it.” This isn't referring to who gets into Jesus' Kingdom and who goes to the lake of fire. Jesus is telling Peter and the other apostles and anyone who wishes to follow Him that in order to have fullness of life forever, they must deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Christ on a path that ultimately means they *lose* their fullness of life here and now.

The Lord makes it clear in v 27 that He is speaking about His return and about how much believers will share in His glory at that time. He is alluding to the *Bēma* when He says, “then He will reward each according to his works.” Kingdom entrance is not a reward for work done. However, fullness of life and ruling with Christ is.

A believer who shrinks back from suffering for Christ may well have more money and more possessions and fewer hassles with unbelievers. However, while they seemingly have more, they actually have much less. Life does not consist of possessions or even the absence of conflict. Life is all about pleasing the King of kings. If we please Him, we win, even if we are martyred for our faith.

The same concept appears a number of times in the NT.

Matthew 10:39, 42. Here is the same paradoxical teaching as in Matt 16:24-28, though with less explanation given. “He who finds his life *will lose* it, and *he who loses* his life for My sake will find it.” This is immediately followed in the verses which follow (Matt 10:40-42) with a

discussion of eternal rewards, showing that the issue here is primarily fullness or lack of fullness of life in the life to come. In fact, in v 42 the Lord uses the word *apollumi* to say that the one who gives even just a cup of cold water in His name “*shall by no means lose his reward.*”

Luke 17:33. After commenting on the deadly judgments that fell upon the people of Noah’s day in the flood and the people of Lot’s day with the raining of fire and brimstone upon Sodom (see discussion above in the section on physical death), the Lord Jesus then said, “Remember Lot’s wife. Whoever seeks to save his life *will lose* it, and *whoever loses* his life will preserve it” (Luke 17:32-33). Lot’s wife had been warned not to look back at what she had left behind. But she did. And as a result, she perished. That is, she was turned into a pillar of salt. If we longingly cling to the old life, the life that God has told us to leave behind, then we too will be destroyed. Our lives will be forfeited. The Lord’s point here certainly applies to our present lives, both in terms of quality and quantity. And it also has application to our fullness of life in the life to come.

This same teaching is found in Mark 8:35; 9:41; Luke 9:24-25; Luke 17:33; and John 12:25.

E. LOST PEOPLE (12 OF 92 = 13%)

Evangelicals often speak of *lost people* as unregenerate people, as people who do not have eternal life. Yet in the NT lost people are often born-again people who are not in fellowship with God.

We err seriously if we assume that people whom the Bible calls *lost people* are necessarily unregenerate. While there are a few places where *apollumi* in the sense of *lost* might refer to unregenerate people (see the discussion below of Matt 10:6; 15:24; 18:11, 14), those are exceptions.¹⁷

¹⁷ See also the discussion under F below regarding eternal condemnation. There are two uses of the word *lost* in John’s Gospel (John 17:12 and 18:9) that may well refer to unregenerate people.

Luke 15:4, 6. In the Parable of the Lost Sheep the Lord told of a shepherd with 100 sheep who “*loses one of them.*” The shepherd then will “go after *the one which is lost* until he finds it.” According to the next verse, when he finds it alive he puts it on his shoulders rejoicing and brings it back to the fold. A sheep which has literally become lost is in view in these two uses of *apollumi* in this verse, as well as the one use in v 6, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep *which was lost.*”¹⁸

Of course, symbolically these lost sheep refer to lost people. But if we are not biased by the appearance of *apollumi*, we will see strong evidence that born-again people who stray are in view.

Notice that the sheep who strays and becomes lost was once part of the flock of 100. It did not become part of the flock by being found and returned to the flock. This corresponds to a believer who strays and returns to the Lord, not to an unbeliever who gains eternal life.

Luke 15:8, 9. In the Parable of the Lost Coin, a woman “*loses one coin.*” Then after she finds it she says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece *which was lost.*” These two uses once again refer literally to something which was misplaced or lost.

Symbolically the lost coin refers to a born again person who strays and returns as well. Notice that the coin was part of the ten before it was lost. And when the woman finds the coin, it is returned to its original place with the other nine.

Luke 15:24, 32. The father of the prodigal rejoices when his son returns, saying, “Let us eat and be merry; for this my son *was lost* and is found.” He repeats this saying again in a slightly different way at the end of the account to the older brother: “Your brother was dead and is alive again, and *was lost* and is found” (v 32).

There is no doubt that the Lord Jesus in this parable is speaking of the same kind of lostness as in the first two

¹⁸ Matthew 18:11, though similar to Luke 15:3-7, more likely has a different sense, the same sense found in Matt 10:6 and 15:24 (discussed below under Matt 10:6).

parables of Luke 15. The lost sheep was literally lost. So was the lost coin. So too was the lost son. He was lost to his father in the sense that his father no longer saw him each day and no longer experienced fellowship with him each day.

The Calvinist has a problem with what the father says in v 32. The prodigal “was dead and is alive again.” If that refers to everlasting life, then it proves eternal security is not true. Only if that refers symbolically to fellowship with God that was lost and regained is eternal security still true.

Likewise, before the son was lost, he did not need to be found. He was with the father and was in fellowship with him before he departed.

Of course, if the three parables concern the Lord Jesus (the shepherd), the Holy Spirit (the woman—the church is the bride of church and the Holy Spirit places believers in the Body of Christ), and God the Father (the father), then being lost is a figure of speech, or an anthropomorphism (since God always knows everything), which expresses the truth that God always is concerned for every believer, even the ones who have strayed and become lost. The one who strays can and does miss out on fellowship with God and with fellow believers during his time in the spiritual far country.

Many think that lost and found in these three parables concerns the eternal destiny of people who are represented by the sheep, the coin, and the son. Actually the issue is the fellowship with God experienced by people.

Matthew 10:6. Jesus commanded the twelve, when He sent them out on a preaching and healing mission: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to *the lost* sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5-6). It is possible that the Lord means *the unregenerate* sheep of the house of Israel. That would be in keeping with a verse like John 17:12. However, it is equally possible that the Lord simply means that the nation has strayed, whether they are regenerate

or not. That would be in keeping with the many uses of *apollumi* in Luke 15 (as well as in the LXX). There is insufficient evidence contextually to support the view that the Lord here is telling them to go to *the unregenerate* of Israel. More likely he means more generically that they are to go to people who have lost their way and who are like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 15:24 carries the same nuance: “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”¹⁹

Matthew 18:14. Here the Lord says, “It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” In light of the use of *apollumi* three verses earlier in Matt 18:11,²⁰ it seems likely that the same sense is in view. If so, then this is not a statement per se about God’s desire that children be born again, which is certainly true (cf. 1 Tim 2:4), but rather a more general statement that God does not want children to lose their way and to become lost children. We even use that expression *lost children* today to refer to children who are undisciplined and unrestrained and without direction in life.

F. THERE ARE ACTUALLY A SMALL NUMBER OF USES THAT REFER TO ETERNAL CONDEMNATION (10 OF 92 = 11%)

Six of the uses of *apollumi* that refer to eternal condemnation appear in John’s Gospel. We’ve already discussed 3:16. The verse before John 3:16, that is, John 3:15, applies as well. So does John 6:39 where Jesus indicates that it is the will of the Father that He *loses* nothing. In that context losing is the opposite of having eternal life.

So also in John 10:28, none of Jesus’ sheep *will perish*.

There is one place, John 17:12 (repeated in 18:9), where the Lord uses the word *lost* (see preceding section) in a

¹⁹ Luke 19:10 appears to carry the same broader sense as well: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

²⁰ See fn 17 and the discussion of Matt 10:6 for an explanation of *apollumi* in Matt 18:11.

way that might refer to the unregenerate. As He prays He reminds the Father that none of His disciples is *lost*, except for Judas the betrayer. That sounds like He is using the word *lost* to signify that Judas is unregenerate. But that understanding is not as obvious as it might seem.

We have help understanding what He meant since that same saying is repeated by John in John 18 when Jesus was arrested. After Jesus said, “Let these [His disciples] go their way” (John 18:8), then John added, “that the saying might be fulfilled which He spoke, ‘Of those whom You gave Me I have lost none’” (John 18:9). The fact that the disciples were not arrested in some sense *fulfilled* what Jesus had said about them not being lost. The point seems to be that Jesus *kept* His disciples (cf. John 17:12) safe from arrest and execution at that time, but He did not keep Judas safe. He let Judas betray Him and He ultimately let Judas go out and hang himself.

John 18:8-9 should cause us to wonder whether what the Lord meant in his high priestly prayer was simply that He kept His disciples close to Him spiritually and that none of them had strayed, except for the betrayer, the son of perdition. While Judas was unregenerate (the title “the son of perdition” suggests that), John 18:8-9 makes us wonder whether *lost* simply refers to the fact that Jesus did not keep Judas as He did the other disciples.

There is a possible explanation that sees *lost* in John 18:9 as referring to unregenerate status. Michaels writes, “The temporary safety of the disciples stands as a sign of what has come to be called their ‘eternal security,’ that is, their assurance of eternal life.”²¹ That is a reasonable suggestion and it might be what John intended by his words in John 18:9. However, it is speculative to be sure.

Thus out of twelve uses in John’s Gospel, at most six, or half, refer to eternal condemnation. But the other half, even in the book that most heavily uses the word in

reference to eternal condemnation, refer to physical death or loss (John 6:12, 27; 10:10 [?]; 11:50; 12:25; 18:14).

There are approximately 80 other uses of *apollumi* in the NT and only four of those likely refer to eternal condemnation. In First and Second Corinthians Paul three times refers to those who are perishing (1 Cor 1:19; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3). It is possible that “those who are perishing” refers to those who are dying under God’s judgment and that “those who are being saved” refers not to believers generally but to overcoming believers specifically. However, it appears that “those who are perishing” refers to those who are condemned and on their way to eternal condemnation unless they come to faith. For example, in 2 Cor 4:3 Paul says, “Our gospel is veiled...to those who are perishing.” The next verse says that they’ve been blinded by Satan and that they “do not believe.”

In his second letter to the Thessalonians Paul wrote about “the coming of the lawless one...with all unrighteous deception among those who perish [or, those who are perishing], because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thess 2:9-10). In the Thessalonian epistles salvation refers to be delivered from the Tribulation wrath by means of the Rapture (cf. 1 Thess 5:10). If the perishing is antithetical to the saving here, then perishing here refers not to eternal condemnation per se, but to suffering through the wrath of the Tribulation.

At most 10 of 92 NT uses of *apollumi* refer to eternal condemnation, which is just under 11%. That makes it wrong to assume that eternal condemnation is in view whenever *apollumi* is used in the NT.

²¹J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010). 892.

IV. WHAT ABOUT SECOND PETER 3:9?

Probably the most famous single verse on repentance and perishing in the NT is 2 Pet 3:9. There Peter says, “The Lord...is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” Many people understand Peter to be saying, *God doesn’t want anyone to be eternally condemned but He instead wants all to come to repentance and hence spend eternity in Jesus’ Kingdom.*

A full discussion of this passage is not possible here.²² However, even a brief analysis shows that the common understanding of 2 Pet 3:9 isn’t at all what Peter meant. In fact, that understanding not only totally misses the point of this verse, but it also changes justification by faith alone into justification by repentance alone.

A simple rule of hermeneutics is that you determine the meaning of a word by its use in context. Well, here it is evident what *apollumi* means in context if we just read the words before and after v 9. In v 6 the same word is used to refer to those who died in the Noahic flood (see discussion above). That’s the only other use of this word in Second Peter and it is in the immediate context. (There is also one use of the word in First Peter and it also carries this meaning.)

In addition v 9 is culminating a discussion begun in v 3 about the delay in the Lord’s promised return. Peter is saying in v 9 that the Lord will fulfill His promise, but He is delaying since He is longsuffering toward us. He knows that the return of Christ will result in the deaths of more than half’s the world’s population during those dreadful seven years. The Lord doesn’t want to kill billions of people on earth.²³ He would rather people repent and live

²² For a fuller discussion see Zane C. Hodges, s.v., “The Second Epistle of Peter,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, Volume 2: Romans-Revelation (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 1183-86, esp. 1185-86.

²³ The Lord never wanted death at all. He did not create Adam and Eve to die. Death was introduced as a result of the fall. After the fall men lived about 1,000 years and then they died. With the wickedness that led to the flood, life expectancies dropped tenfold, so that people could expect to live just 70, 80, or 90 years, not 700, 800, or 900 years.

full lives here and now prior to the Kingdom. But when the sins of mankind are filled up, then the Tribulation will begin and billions will indeed die. Even then, however, God will show that He would prefer men repent and avoid premature death (Rev 9:20-21; 16:9, 11).

The verses which follow v 9 discuss not eternal condemnation, but the destruction of the current earth and heavens by fire. Temporal destruction is what is being discussed.

Verse 9 is preceded by a discussion of the first destruction of the earth by flood and followed by a discussion of the second and last destruction of the earth by fire. Both destructions are temporal. Both result in an enormous number of deaths.²⁴

Thus we might paraphrase 2 Pet 3:9 in this way: *God wishes that none should die (or die prematurely) but that all should come to repentance and extend their lives and their experience of His blessings.*

V. PRACTICAL RAMIFICATIONS

A. EVANGELISM IS CLEARER

When we evangelize, the issue of what a person must do to be born again is foremost in the conversation. If the condition is only believing in Jesus Christ for the gift of eternal life, then the conversation will be simple and easy for the unbeliever to understand (though, not easy to believe since it seems wrong).

During the Tribulation probably half of the billions who die will be under 40. Thus many won’t even get half of what we now consider a normal lifespan. All of this, I believe, is in the background of the statement, “God wished that none should perish.”

²⁴ Of course, in the case of the burning up of the heavens and the earth, the deaths occur before that time, that is, during the Tribulation (and to a lesser extent in the rebellion after the Millennium). However, Peter’s point is that the Lord’s return will result in multitudes dying and God doesn’t want that. God in His mercy is delaying that cataclysmic judgment until the sins on earth are, like they were before flood, so great that He determines the time for judgment can no longer be postponed.

However, if the condition of everlasting life is faith *and repentance*, then the conversation becomes quite complicated. We may say that eternal life is a free gift, but then we go on to say that the way we get that free gift is by believing in Jesus Christ and by turning from our sins and following Christ. This is confusing for the listener. In what sense is it free if I must turn from my sins and follow Christ to receive it? That sounds like it is a good deal, but not a free gift.

If we present verses like Luke 13:3, 5 and 2 Pet 3:9 as evangelistic verses, then our evangelism will be less than clear.

B. ASSURANCE IS POSSIBLE

How can a person be certain that he has everlasting life and will never be eternally condemned? If John 3:16 gives the answer, then one is sure if he believes that Jesus guarantees the eternal destiny of all who simply believe in Him. Works play no role whatsoever in assurance in light of John 3:16. As one friend told me, the Lord said that the one who *believes in Him* has everlasting life, not the one who *behaves in Him*.

But if assurance is sourced in passages like Luke 13:3, 5 and 2 Pet 3:9, then one cannot be sure prior to death of his eternal destiny. As many Calvinists have told me, under Calvinism we cannot be sure that we will persevere to the end. If we fail to persevere, then we will prove we never *really* believed, and we will go to Hades awaiting the Great White Throne Judgment and banishment to the lake of fire.

If the unrepentant go to hell, then none of us can be sure of our eternal destiny. Any of us could fall away and remain that way until death.

C. DISCIPLESHIP IS CLEARER

If a believer grasps that God will judge him here and now as he walks in the spiritual far country, then he

should be highly motivated to walk in the light and to live under God's blessings. The blessings-cursings motif runs all through the OT and NT. The concept of perishing is a crucial aspect of the cursing motif.

If, however, a believer thinks that God will send him to hell if he falls away and fails to repent before death, then he will adopt a works-salvation mentality. His concern will not be temporal judgment, but eternal condemnation. Fear of hell will become a major factor in his daily walk.

For the obsessive-compulsives in churches, this fear of hell can be paralyzing. I get many calls and emails and have many conversations with people who are afraid of either losing eternal life or of proving that they don't really have it.

Certainty of one eternal destiny should produce a profound sense of gratitude and of love for God. That motivation, combined with fear of God's discipline and desire for His blessing, aids a believer in persevering in faith and good works.

D. MOTIVATION FOR GODLY LIVING IS CLEARER

If a person is afraid that he will go to hell if he falls away, then all other motivations pale in comparison. It is hard to be motivated by temporal or even eternal rewards if you are not sure if you will spend eternity in the Kingdom or in the lake of fire. All your energy will be spent in trying to ensure that you make it into the Kingdom and avoid the lake of fire.

If, however, a person is sure of his eternal destiny, fear of hell is not a motivation at all. The person no longer worries about hell since he knows that he has everlasting life. As mentioned above, this opens the door for powerful motivations like gratitude, love of God, desire for blessings, and fear of temporal judgment.

VI. CONCLUSION

The popular understanding of the word *perish* in the NT is that it typically refers to eternal condemnation or hell. While it is recognized that there are a few places where *apollumi* refers to temporal death or destruction, most NT scholars would say that *apollumi* often is used in a spiritual sense to refer to eternal condemnation.

The evidence shows that the opposite is true. *Apollumi* in the NT most often refers to physical death or temporal loss or destruction, not to eternal condemnation. The evidence shows that the latter is actually a relatively rare use of *apollumi*, occurring just under 11% of the time, all in John or 1-2 Corinthians.

Practical application of this research shows that clarity on this issue can aid our ministries of evangelism and discipleship. Confusion about the true nature of perishing can hurt our ministries significantly.