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## Does Galatians Contain “Twenty-Nine Distinct Damnations”?

Robert Browning wrote a famous poem called “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” (1842), which presents a tongue-in-cheek dramatic monologue by a monk who has been made perversely jealous by the moral superiority of a colleague named Brother Lawrence.

The speaker in the poem expresses his hope that Brother Lawrence will fall into some dire temptation; the best-case scenario would be if he committed mortal sin and subsequently died before getting to confession. Then he would be damned to hell (despite his exemplary virtuous life).

Thus Browning mocks religious hypocrisy and the supposed absurdities of Roman Catholic theology (as he understood it).

In any case, lines 49–56 of the poem read as follows:

There’s a great text in Galatians,  
Once you trip on it, entails  
Twenty-nine distinct damnations,  
One sure, if another fails;  
If I trip him just a-dying,  
Sure of heaven as sure can be,  
Spin him round and send him flying  
Off to hell, a Manichee?

The speaker's secret weapon is Paul's letter to the Galatians (or some portion thereof), which if one can find it ("trip on it") reveals twenty-nine ways to be damned. Surely one of these will work for the saintly Brother Lawrence, for whom there will then be no more hope than for the heretics who espouse Manichaeism.

Biblical scholars have spent a century trying to discern what text or combination of texts Browning had in mind. Granted, Paul was mad when he wrote the latter and there are threats of condemnation—but *twenty-nine distinct damnations?*

The general consensus today is that no such texts are evident. The point, probably, was that the speaker was sufficiently deranged to have found twenty-nine paths to damnation in Paul's letter that would have eluded most exegetes. Thus one of the morals of the poem could be that one can find in the Bible whatever one is looking for.