

# Why Would a Loving God Send Us to Hell?

by Wayne Jackson

The late Bertrand Russell, a renowned British agnostic, wrote a small publication titled, *Why I Am Not A Christian*. One of the reasons he cited for his unbelief was that Jesus Christ taught that there is an eternal hell for the wicked.

Russell could not harmonize Christ's doctrine about hell with the biblical position of a just and benevolent God; hence, he rejected the teaching of Jesus and inclined toward the belief that there is no God. Russell, who lived a life of reckless abandon, echoed the sentiments of Cain: "My punishment is greater than I can bear." On that basis, he became a determined opponent of true religion.

The problem of reconciling eternal retribution with the goodness of God also has had a significant impact on the religious world. Many religions, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and the World Wide Church of God (Armstrongism), have rejected the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the wicked. Even the churches of Christ have had their advocates of this erroneous viewpoint (see Fudge, Smith).

## Ad Hominem Arguments

An ad hominem argument (meaning, "to the man") is the type of reasoning that focuses on an opponent's inconsistency. Let us, at the outset of this discussion, utilize this form of argument in response to the "no hell" theory.

First, a major premise of the "no eternal punishment" dogma is the notion that such is at variance with true justice. The argument might be framed like this. The Bible speaks of a just and good God; it also teaches the doctrine of eternal hell. These two positions are mutually exclusive. Therefore, the Scriptures are inconsistent and cannot be true.

We insist, however, that those who thus argue are under obligation to defend their use of the terms "just" and "good." By whose standard are these character traits to be measured? Critics of the Bible must not be allowed to become "theological dictionaries unto themselves." Their reasoning is based solely upon **their own ideas** of how goodness and justice should be expressed.

If it is true that the Scriptures teach that God has appointed eternal punishment for impenitently evil people, and if it likewise is correct that the Bible affirms the justice and goodness of Jehovah, then it must follow that eternal punishment is not inconsistent with the nature of God. It is at odds **only** with some men's **perception** of goodness and justice.

Second, no one (skeptic or otherwise) is ready to concede that evildoers are unworthy of **any** type of punishment. It is recognized that no society could survive in such an atmosphere. Should the rapist, the robber, and the murderer be told: "Admittedly, you have done wrong, but we

(society) will not punish you for your crimes. This would be unjust”? Is there anyone who argues that there should be **no** consequences resulting from criminal conduct? Surely not! It is conceded, therefore, that punishment is not inconsistent with true justice.

Third, let us take our reasoning a step further. Is it the case that genuine justice can be served even when an evil man’s punishment is extended beyond the time involved in the commission of his crime? Do we, for example, in our criminal justice system, ask the murderer, “Sir, how long did it take you to kill your wife?”—then assign his incarceration accordingly? Would justice be maintained by such an approach?

Here, then, is the point. True justice, combined with genuine goodness, allows the possibility that a wrongdoer may be required to suffer a penalty that is considerably longer than the duration of his evil. The real issue, therefore, is not punishment per se, or even protracted punishment; rather, it is **eternal** punishment. The skeptic (or religious materialist) simply wants to tell God how long the penalty is to be! Remember, however, in a system of true justice, the offender is not allowed to set his own sentence.

## **Eternal Punishment and a Just God**

Since no one has ever returned from the dead to discuss his or her personal experiences, this issue is not one that can be settled by human speculation; rather, it must be decided by divine revelation. When the relevant biblical data is assembled, it will be seen, even from man’s jaundiced viewpoint, that the fact of eternal punishment is not inconsistent with the character of a righteous God. Our case will be set forth in a series of interrelated propositions.

## **The Nature and Fall of Man**

Man was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), hence, he is a volitional being. He has the power to choose good or evil. Joshua challenged Israel, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve” (Joshua 24:15). Humanity was not programmed to rebel, rather, men have “willed” to reject Heaven’s plan for living on this earth (see Matthew 23:37; John 5:40). Man was made upright, but he generally has sought the way of evil (Ecclesiastes 7:29). There are consequences associated with this type of activity.

## **Sin and the Nature of God**

The Bible clearly teaches that God is an absolutely holy Being (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8)—i.e., he is utterly separate from evil. His holiness is demonstrated in numerous narratives in the Scriptures. At Sinai, the chasm between God and sinful Israel was underscored vividly (Exodus 19:12-25). The tabernacle arrangement, with its holy place and most holy place (the abode of God [Exodus 25:22]) certainly was designed to instruct the Hebrews relative to Jehovah’s holy nature (Exodus 26:33).

The Lord’s holiness not only suggests that he cannot commit sin personally (James 1:13), it also means that he cannot ignore rebellion as if it had never happened. The prophet Habakkuk

declared to Jehovah: “Your eyes are too pure to look upon evil [i.e., favorably]; you cannot tolerate wrong” (1:13, NIV). God takes no pleasure in wickedness (Psalm 5:4), and those who indulge themselves therein will be recipients of his vengeance (11:6-7). The Bible affirms that the outpouring of divine wrath on the ungodly is, in fact, a “revelation of the **righteous** judgment of God” (Romans 2:5; emphasis added).

## Sin Separates From God

When humanity chose to sin, it made the decision to be separated from the holy Creator. The prophet clearly stated: “[Y]our iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you” (Isaiah 59:2). In biblical parlance, “death” generally denotes a separation of some sort. When the spirit departs the body, the body is dead (James 2:26). Similarly, when a person enters a state of sinfulness, he becomes spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1), for, by that act, he has determined to separate himself from God. Remember, the initiation of this estrangement was not forced on us by our Maker; it is totally human responsibility.

## Hell: The Ultimate Separation

Inspiration describes the penalty of hell as “the second death” (Revelation 20:14), which suggests that it is the ultimate separation from God. This is emphasized forcefully in several New Testament passages. In the parable of the virgins, those unprepared virgins who “slept” (i.e., died), when awakened by the coming of the Bridegroom, wanted entrance into his presence, but the door was shut, and they were denied that association (Matthew 25:1-13).

Unprofitable servants will be “cast out” and will hear the Lord exclaim: “Depart from me” (Matthew 25:41). Paul expressed it like this. Those who know not God and who obey not the gospel, “shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction **from the face of the Lord** and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:9; emphasis added). This abiding separation from God is but a continuation of the estrangement that the rebel cultivated in this life. The Lord is not responsible for such a reckless decision!

## The Horror of Separation from God

How is it possible to describe the spiritual state of being banished from the presence of the supreme Being of the universe? Being alienated from Jehovah is the ultimate experience of horror. It is a separation from everything that is pure and good, everything that is right and wholesome, and everything that makes for joy and tranquility. It is, however, a **spiritual** experience, and since the human mind operates on the plane of the material, we really are not prepared to appreciate the gravity of such a circumstance. Hence, God has employed appropriate symbolism to describe the agonies of hell.

The spiritual abode of the wicked is a state of pain, trouble, and sorrow (Psalm 116:3). It is characterized by shame and contempt (Daniel 12:2), and is a realm of affliction (Jonah 2:2). Hell is a place of outer darkness where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30)—

a sphere of eternal fire (Matthew 25:41) where the “worm” (a figure for gnawing anguish) does not die (Mark 9:48).

The wicked are described as being beaten with stripes (Luke 12:47-48). They are recipients of God’s wrath and indignation, they experience tribulation and anguish (Romans 2:8-9), and they suffer punishment as a manifestation of the Lord’s vengeance (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). Hell is a place of utter torment, where no rest ever is known (Revelation 14:10-11).

While it would not be an expression of responsible exegesis to literalize the figures of speech cataloged above, one must never forget that the symbolism is designed to emphasize the terror of being abandoned by God. Moreover, the figures doubtless do not do justice to the actual reality of this eternal nightmare!

## **Is the Punishment Eternal in Duration?**

A major objection to the doctrine of hell is its everlasting nature. Must the suffering go on without end? Is it really just for one to be punished forever when he or she has been devoted to evil for only a relatively brief span of time? Consider this question for a moment.

Is God just in granting eternal bliss to those who have served him only temporarily in this world? This writer never has heard the Lord charged with unfairness in this instance! It must be emphasized again that the issue is not one that can be determined with the subjective reasoning of biased human emotion. The Bible must supply the answer.

The Scriptures explicitly affirm the abiding nature of divine retribution. The shame and punishment of evil people will be everlasting (Daniel 12:2; Matthew 25:46). “Everlasting” literally means “always being.” Note its contrast with “temporal” in 2 Corinthians 4:18.

The claim is made, however, that “everlasting” does not always mean that which is absolutely unending in nature. True, but in all such cases we learn this not from the nature of the word itself, but from additional information in the Scriptures. The context always is the final judge of any word’s meaning.

In Matthew 25:46, the “eternal” punishment of the wicked is contrasted with the “eternal” life (i.e., communion with God) of the righteous. Here, clearly, both are unending in duration. Further, Jesus emphasized that in hell, the agony does not cease (Mark 9:48), and John notes that the smoke of the “torment” of hell’s inmates “goes up [the Greek present tense stresses continuous action] for ever and ever” (Revelation 14:11). Compare the duration of the blissful worship described in Revelation 4:8-10.

Also, the nature of the soul argues for eternal punishment. Consider the following.

## **We Are Not Merely Mortal**

Materialists allege that we are wholly mortal, without a soul. If such were the case, one man could murder another and **completely destroy him**.

Christ declared, however: “And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). (The word “destroy” does not mean annihilation. “The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being, but of wellbeing” [Vine, 212].) One must conclude that the soul is immortal.

## **Ongoing Existence**

In one of the Lord’s discussions with the Sadducees, he said that in the resurrection men do not “die anymore: for they are equal unto the angels” (Luke 20:36). It is quite clear that there is something about man that lives forever.

## **Incorruptible Apparel**

When Peter wanted to encourage godliness in Christian women, he suggested they should be clothed with the incorruptible apparel of a meek and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:4). It hardly seems appropriate that a corruptible spirit should be clothed with incorruptible apparel. The implication concerning the abiding nature of the spirit is obvious.

## **Judas’ Example**

Jesus said of Judas Iscariot that it would be better for him if he never had been born (Mark 14:21). If that traitor had no existence prior to his commencement as a human being, and if he was to go out of existence at death, why would it have been better had he never been born? The Lord’s statement indicates that Judas’ soul, in a state of torment, would survive the death of his body.

Finally, the nature of the resurrected body demands that punishment for the wicked is everlasting. In 1 Corinthians 15:52, Paul affirmed that the dead are raised “incorruptible” (cf. 1 Timothy 1:17, where the term is used of God). Elsewhere we are told that the unjust will be raised (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15), and Christ acknowledged the punishment of both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28). All of these factors lead only to the conclusion that if there is punishment after death, it must be eternal in its duration—unless it can be shown that there is some plan of salvation in that state. And for that view, there is absolutely no evidence at all. In fact, the Bible teaches just the opposite.

After death, **judgment** follows—not a second chance for salvation (Hebrews 9:27).

Between the temporary abode of those who die saved and those who die lost, “there is a great gulf fixed” (the perfect-tense form in the Greek Testament stresses the abiding nature of the separation), and passing from one realm into the other is an impossibility (Luke 16:26). Moreover, the rich man in that place of torment acknowledged that his brothers on earth needed to make preparation during their earthly sojourn; he knew there was no post-death plan of redemption (see Luke 16:28-31).

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1ff), those who “slumbered and slept” (a figure for dying) in an unprepared condition, awoke (i.e., were raised—[Daniel 12:2]) in precisely that same state, hence, were forbidden to enter in with the Bridegroom (Christ).

There is no opportunity for obedience after death!

## Justice and Equitable Punishment

An added dimension to this study surely must be that of “degrees of punishment.” The Scriptures teach that eternal punishment will be proportionate to what is deserved. Jesus said that in “the day of judgment” it would be “more tolerable” for those pagan cities that had received little spiritual influence than for those cities that rejected him in spite of seeing his marvelous deeds (Matthew 11:22-24).

In one illustration, the Lord told of a certain servant who behaved himself in an unseemly fashion. When his master came and found him unprepared, he assigned him to punishment. Christ then stated:

“And that servant, who knew his lord’s will, and made not ready, nor did according to his will, shall he beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not, and did things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. And to whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required, and to whom they commit much, of him will they ask the more” (Luke 12:47-48).

Christ indicated that there were varying levels of responsibility when he said to Pilate: “[H]e that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin” (John 19:11). The writer of Hebrews spoke of those who would receive “sorer punishment” (10:29), and James admonished: “Be not many of you teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment” (3:1). Of one thing we may be certain: even in the punishment of those who are evil, the Judge of all the earth will do what is right (Genesis 18:25).

## God’s Goodness and the Cross

No one can argue logically against the benevolence of Jehovah in light of the cross. As we observed earlier, the holiness and justice of Deity demand that sin be addressed. Appropriate reward for good and evil is an evidence that “there is a God that judges in the earth” (see Psalm 58:10-11). The problem is: how can a just God keep from sending rebellious man to hell?

The answer is: **through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ**. In Romans 3:21-26, Paul affirmed that God has shown his righteousness in sending Christ as a propitiation for sin. In this loving act, he preserves his own righteousness, yet, at the same time, becomes the Justifier of those who, through faith, are obedient to his Son (Hebrews 5:8-9).

When Christ died, it was not for any sin he had committed. Though he was tempted in all points like as we are, he had no sin (Hebrews 4:15). When Peter wrote that Jesus “did not sin,” he employed a verbal tense which suggests that the Lord **never** sinned—not even once (1 Peter 2:22)!

Isaiah repeatedly emphasized the substitutionary nature of the Lord's death when he wrote:

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed .... Jehovah hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

When the prophet declared that our “iniquity” was laid upon the Son of God, he employed a figure of speech known as metonymy (one thing is put for another)—in this case, the cause being put for the effect.

In other words, God did not put our **sins** upon Christ, but the **penalty** of our wrongs. Christ bore our “hell” twenty centuries ago. In spite of the fact, therefore, that all sinners deserve to be lost, the Lord has provided a way to “escape the judgment of hell” (cf. Matthew 23:33). No man can argue against the love of God in light of his unspeakable gift at the cross!

#### References

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#### Scripture References

Genesis 1:26; Joshua 24:15; Matthew 23:37; John 5:40; Ecclesiastes 7:29; Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8; Exodus 19:12-25; Exodus 25:22; Exodus 26:33; James 1:13; Psalm 5:4; Romans 2:5; Isaiah 59:2; James 2:26; Ephesians 2:1; Revelation 20:14; Matthew 25:1-13; Matthew 25:41; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Psalm 116:3; Daniel 12:2; Jonah 2:2; Matthew 25:30; Mark 9:48; Luke 12:47-48; Romans 2:8-9; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Revelation 14:10-11; Matthew 25:46; 1 Corinthians 4:18; Revelation 14:11; Revelation 4:8-10; Matthew 10:28; Luke 20:36; 1 Peter 3:4; Mark 14:21; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Timothy 1:17; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; Hebrews 9:27; Luke 16:26; Luke 16:28-31; Matthew 25:1; Matthew 11:22-24; John 19:11; Genesis 18:25; Psalm 58:10-11; Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 5:8-9; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; Isaiah 53:5-6; Matthew 23:33

# Is Hell eternal?

by [Matt Slick](#)

[Return to Universalism Section](#)

The teaching that there is an eternal Hell in which hordes of mankind will suffer eternal punishment can be a difficult doctrine to accept. We hear so much about God's infinite love and how He desires that all men be saved ([1 Tim. 2:4](#)). However, those who develop their theologies based upon the "gentle" side of God do so with an incomplete picture. Not only is God loving ([1 John 4:8-10](#)), gracious ([Exo. 33:19](#), [1 Pet. 2:3](#)), and merciful ([Exodus 34:6](#), [Psalm 67:1](#), [James 5:11](#)) but also He is also holy ([Isaiah 6:3](#), [Rev. 4:8](#)), just ([Neh. 9:32-33](#), [2 Thess. 1:6](#)), and hates sin ([Psalm 5:5-6](#), [Hab. 1:13](#)). God punishes the sinner ([Jer. 50:31](#), [Ezk. 44:12](#), [Matt. 25:46](#), [2 Thess. 1:9](#), [2 Pet. 2:9](#), [Heb. 10:29](#)).

The Bible teaches that there is a fiery Hell, a place that Jesus warned people about.

"And if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire," ([Matt. 18:8](#)).<sup>1</sup>

Eternal fire is real. Jesus said that it was. In fact, Jesus spoke a great deal about Hell. It is what Jesus came here to save us from.

There will be a Day of Judgment when all people will face God. Those who are not covered by the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross will be cast out into Hell where they will undergo eternal punishment. "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life," ([Matt. 25:46](#)). In this verse, the same word, "eternal," is used to describe the punishment of the wicked as well as the eternal life of the believer. The punishment is endless as is the eternal life of the believer. That is why the Gospel ([1 Cor. 15:1-4](#)) is so important because it saves people from eternal damnation: "Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand,<sup>2</sup> by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,<sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."



"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life," ([John 5:24](#)).

Following are a few verses that show the eternality of the Hell and punishment. God uses different phrases to describe the same thing.

- "And these will pay the penalty of **eternal destruction**, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power," ([2 Thess. 1:9](#)).
- "Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of **eternal fire**," ([Jude 7](#)).
- "These men are those who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; <sup>13</sup> wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved **forever**," ([Jude 12-13](#)).

### Is "forever and ever" without end?

The phrase, "forever and ever," is used both of describing God's eternal worth and the duration of eternal damnation. The exact same Greek phrase is used in each of the verses in the table below.

<b>forever and ever</b> αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων aionas ton aionon "ages of the ages"	
<b>Eternal--without end</b>	<b>Eternal Damnation</b>
"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory <b>forever and ever</b> . Amen," ( <a href="#">1 Tim. 1:17</a> ).	"And a second time they said, 'Hallelujah! Her smoke rises up <b>forever and ever</b> ,' " ( <a href="#">Rev. 19:3</a> ).
". . . To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion <b>forever and ever</b> ," ( <a href="#">Rev. 5:13</a> ).	"And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night <b>forever and ever</b> ," ( <a href="#">Rev. 20:10</a> ).

The Greek phrase, *aionas ton aionon*, which is translated "forever and ever," occurs 18 times in the Greek New Testament. In 17 of them, the phrase means without end, extending into infinity. In [Rev. 19:3](#), the phrase is used to describe the destruction of the great whore of Babylon ([Rev. 17:1, 4](#)) whose smoke ascends forever and ever. It, too, is eternal, and it signifies the beginning of the eternal judgment that comes upon her.

Also worth examining is [Rev. 14:11](#): "And the smoke of their torment goes up **forever and ever**; and they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."

The Greek in [Rev. 14:11](#) is only slightly different. In the table above, "forever and ever" is translated from the Greek, *aionas ton aionon*, which is literally "ages of the of ages." In [Rev. 14:11](#), the Greek is *aionas aionon* which is literally, "ages of ages." In the latter, the single Greek word, "of the," is missing. But it is not necessary and does not change the meaning of the text. Therefore, the Scripture teaches the smoke of their torment goes up forever--without end.

## Unquenchable Fire

Some believe that the fires of Hell are symbolic and/or temporal. But the following verses show that they are not.

[Matt. 3:12](#) says, "And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with **unquenchable** fire," (See also [Luke 3:17](#)).

[Mark 9:43](#) says, "And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell, into the **unquenchable** fire." The word, "unquenchable," is *asbestos* in the Greek. According to the enhanced Strong's lexicon, it means "unquenchable, the eternal hell fire to punish the damned."

The following citations are from Greek dictionaries and Lexicons. They show that the word, "unquenchable," which is *asbestos* in the Greek, (which occurs only in [Matt. 3:12](#), [Luke 3:17](#), and [Mark 9:43](#)) means unquenchable, without end.

- "unquenchable, inextinguishable"[2](#)
- "not quenched"[3](#)
- "pertaining to a fire that cannot be put out"--"unquenchable."[4](#)
- "unquenched, unquenchable"[5](#)
- "that cannot be put out"[6](#)
- "inextinguishable"[7](#)

Is Hell eternal? Yes, it is. Are its fires without end? Yes, they are. Is it a pleasant doctrine to discuss? Not really. But, Hell is real. This is all the more reason to preach the Gospel. Jesus said,

"And if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire," ([Matt. 18:8](#)).

- [1](#). All Scripture quotes are from the NASB.
- [2](#). Liddell, H. G., and Scott, *Abridged Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Available Online: Logos Library System.

- [3.](#) Vine, W. E., *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1981. Available: Logos Library System.
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- [5.](#) *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1995. Available: Logos Library System.
- [6.](#) Wigram-Green, *The New Englishman's Greek Concordance and Lexicon*, Peabody MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1982, p. 771.
- [7.](#) Arndt, W. A., F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 114.

## Related Articles

- [What are the verses that mention Hell in the New Testament?](#)
- [Why should God make people knowing they are going to Hell forever?](#)
- [A loving God would never send anyone to hell](#)
- [Why should I go to Hell if I am sincere?](#)

### Annihilationism

**Annihilationism** is the belief that the final fate of those who are not saved is literal and final death and destruction. It runs counter to the mainstream traditional Christian understanding of [hell](#) as eternal suffering and separation from [God](#).

In contrast to the more traditional view, which holds that the wicked will remain conscious in hell forever, annihilationism teaches that, whether or not God may use hell to exact some conscious punishment for [sins](#), he will eventually destroy or annihilate the wicked completely, leaving only the righteous to live on in immortality. This is essentially a moot point for [Universalists](#) since in their view all will be saved and hell will one day be empty.

Each of the three views, Annihilationism, Eternal Torment and Universalism, has at least one major feature in common with the alternatives. Universalism and Eternal Torment both affirm that everyone will have immortality. Universalism and Annihilationism affirm that evil will one day no longer exist, and Annihilationism and Eternal Torment both affirm that some will be punished eternally, without remedy. For the annihilationist, however, eternal punishment is seen as "permanent elimination."

Conditional immortality

The [doctrine](#) of Annihilationism is often, although not always, bound-up with the notion of Conditional Immortality, a belief that the [soul](#) is not innately immortal. At death, both the wicked and righteous will pass into unconsciousness, only to be resurrected at the [final judgment](#). God, who alone is immortal, passes on the gift of immortality to the righteous, who will live forever in [heaven](#) or on an idyllic earth, while the wicked will ultimately face the second death, i.e. extinction.

Even though it may be logically possible for one to believe in the natural immortality of the soul in the orthodox sense (rightly understood), and at the same time affirm that God will annihilate the wicked, "in actual practice those who teach annihilationism also teach conditional immortality, and vice versa. This accounts for the tendency to treat the terms as synonyms." <sup>[1]</sup>

### Presuppositions

While annihilationists claim that they find their position to be biblical, one common rationale is that divine justice and love make *eternal suffering* in Hell a morally repugnant idea. Many annihilationists claim that the idea is an unfair punishment for finite sins of people. How can this accurately reflect God's ultimate victory over suffering and evil, they argue, when it permanently installs a place of suffering in the final, eternal order? Likewise, how can the saved live in blissful joy knowing that some of their loved ones burn forever in hell? With this in mind, many annihilationists (though certainly not all) claim that the idea of "eternal suffering in Hell" is a misconception and perversion of the truth about God's justice and love.

Traditionalists respond that only God is qualified to determine what is truly just, and raise suspicions that annihilationists may be succumbing to modern cultural pressures. The argument does go both ways, however. A common response to the idea of annihilation is that God is infinitely holy and therefore demands infinite conscious punishment. Another argument is that preaching annihilationism will make people less eager to spread the Gospel. Annihilationists respond that what matters is not what any person believes the holiness of God demands, because only God is qualified to determine what is truly just, and that whether or not something is true is irrelevant of how it affects evangelism, if it is even conceded that annihilationism dampens missionary zeal in the first place. <sup>[2]</sup>

### Main arguments

#### **The biblical language of destruction**

Annihilationists argue that language used in the Bible to describe the fate of the lost speaks in terms of destruction, death, and similar terms which imply a *ceasing to exist*. Examples include Matthew 10:28, where Jesus warns of God's ability to destroy body and soul in Gehenna, Matt 13:40-42 where Jesus speaks of the judgement by comparing it to weeds being thrown into a furnace, Romans 6:23 where Paul says that the wages of sin is death, 2 Peter 2:6, where Peter says that what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah was an example of what will happen to the lost, and so forth.

#### **Notions of hell depend on Greek ideas**

Annihilationists also claim that traditional notions of hell depend on Greek ideas of an immortal soul, which have been erroneously read back into Christian Scripture. Traditionalists find this irrelevant, pointing to passages in the Bible they claim support the idea of an immortal soul. Annihilationists reply

by denying that Scripture does teach this, instead pointing to Scripture that declares immortality itself to be a gift.

William Crockett responds,

There is no doubt that second-century Christian apologists drew heavily on Greek philosophy, especially on the philosophy of the Cynics, to support the Christian position. But Fudge makes it sound as if we have a struggle between Paul, the Hebraic-minded Jew, and post-New Testament hellenists. In fact, Paul himself was heavily influenced by hellenism, as was every Jew in Palestine during the first century. 'In Hellenistic- Roman times,' says Martin Hengel, 'Jerusalem was an 'international city,' in which representatives of the Diaspora throughout the world met together.' In short, says Hengel, '*Palestinian Judaism must be regarded as Hellenistic Judaism.*' We need to be careful, therefore, not to suggest that the New Testament writers looked through Jewish Old Testament eyes when in fact their literature, education, culture, philosophy, and language were thoroughly permeated with Greek thought... [A]lready in the first century we know that the Pharisees of which Paul was one—had absorbed the doctrine of immortality. Josephus comments on the Pharisees: They believe that souls have power to survive death and that there are rewards and punishments under the earth for those who have led lives of virtue or vice: eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage to a new life (*Antiquities* 8.14). Every soul, they maintain, is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone passes into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment (*War* 2.163). We cannot say that New Testament writers endorsed the Platonic or Pharisaic belief in a never-dying soul. If this were the case, annihilationism as a view would be impossible to maintain because the soul in every human would simply exist forever, whether in heaven or in hell. In the New Testament, however, we find the Hebrew belief in the resurrection of the dead rather than the Greek immortality of the soul (1 Cor. 15:53-55; cf. Dan. 12:2). The Pharisees believed in the resurrection as well, but only for the righteous; yet they still expected the souls of the wicked to be punished eternally. Their view combined the Greek idea of immortality with the Hebrew doctrine of resurrection. The apostles taught that everyone, whether good or evil, would be resurrected (John 5:29; Acts 24:15; cf. Dan. 12:2); they did not suggest the soul had some special substance that made it eternal. Yet it is clear from the New Testament that both the righteous and the wicked are destined to exist forever even though the precise nature of the resurrected bodies is not always clear. All things depend on God for their existence, and it is God who resurrects and sustains his creatures, some unto life in heaven, and some unto death in the place we call hell.<sup>[3]</sup><sup>^</sup>

### **Cosmic harmony**

William Crockett writes,

"If [annihilationism] were not so, say the annihilationists, how could there be harmony in the cosmos? When God creates a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 65:17; Rom. 8:19-23), is it not reasonable to expect the whole creation to be at peace with God? If somewhere, in some dark corner of the universe, there are still rebellious or suffering creatures gnashing their teeth, how can this be considered harmony? "This is a reasonable argument, but an argument that better suits universalism than it does annihilationism. The logic of harmony at the end of time would suggest that God will gather all his creation into one big harmonious family, rather than setting up a cosmic scaffold on the Judgment Day to dispatch masses of people into oblivion. "In any case, the problem with this kind of argument is that it imposes present-day expectations on ancient writers. The annihilationists suppose that a new heaven

and a new earth should produce harmony, or else the renovation is somehow incomplete. To annihilationists it seems ludicrous to say that God will renovate nature, yet still have sinners languishing in hell. But the Jewish writers of late antiquity do not follow this line of reasoning. It matters little whether the wicked are destroyed, plunged into hell, or otherwise shriveled into insignificance. They never suggest that harmony must come from annihilation as opposed to eternal suffering. Put bluntly, harmony comes when evil is removed notwithstanding the method. To them the wicked are hostile elements, intrusions that mar the landscape of God's renovation. When judgment finally comes, the wicked are cast aside, and that is all that matters."<sup>[4]</sup> To this, an annihilationist might argue that, philosophy and common beliefs of the apostle's contemporaries aside, that the scripture does indicate cosmic harmony, that all things are under God and that his enemies will be done away with, which does not allow for the eternal existence, let alone torment, of the wicked. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 and Ephesians 1:10 are often cited <sup>[5]</sup>

### Literalism and symbolism

Much of the debate revolves around terminology and the symbolic imagery of Revelation. Annihilationists argue that passages that speak of the unsaved as perishing (John 3:16) or being destroyed (Matt. 10:28) should be taken literally. Traditionalists argue these terms do not necessarily include the idea of annihilation or ceasing to exist. Traditionalists argue that the passages in Revelation that speak of everlasting torment, even though it is apocalyptic imagery, should nonetheless be taken literally. Annihilationists point out that such imagery is, in virtually all other cases, not literal at all (e.g. the lamb, the beast, the stars, the candlesticks etc), that symbolic language from the Old Testament is used (such as when one compares Revelation 14:9-11, 19:3 with Isaiah 34:9-10), and claim that literal interpretations of the meanings of visions referred to in texts such as Revelation 20:10 lead to serious logical and hermeneutical problems. <sup>[6]</sup>

### History of support

The vast majority of Christian writers, from Tertullian to Luther, generally held to traditional notions of hell. However, the annihilationist position is not without some historical warrant. Embryonic forms of conditional immortality can be found in the writing of [Justin Martyr](#) (d. 165).<sup>[7]</sup> [Ignatius](#) of Antioch (d. 107) is also supposed to be a conditionalist according to some conditionalist writers. In his Epistle to the Magnesians, he wrote "Let us not, therefore, be insensible to His kindness. For were He to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be". <sup>[8]</sup> Some suggest it is also found in the writings of Arnobius (d. 330).<sup>[9]</sup> However, the Second Council of Constantinople (553) condemned the idea.

In 1520 [Martin Luther](#) (1483-1546) published a defense of 41 of his propositions and cited the pope's immortality declaration as among "those monstrous opinions to be found in the Roman dunghill of decretals." The 27th Proposition reads,

*"However, I permit the Pope establish articles of faith for himself and for his own faithful - such are: a) That the bread and wine are transubstantiated in the sacrament; b) that the essence of God neither generates nor is generated; c) that the soul is the substantial form of the human body; d) that he (the pope) is emperor of the world and king of heaven, and earthly god; e) that the soul is immortal; and all these endless monstrosities in the Roman dunghill of decretals - in order that such as his faith is, such may be his gospel, such also his faithful, and such his church, and that the lips may have suitable lettuce and the lid may be worthy of the dish."* <sup>[10]</sup>

## Annihilationism today

Today many traditionalists claim that the doctrine is most often associated with groups descended from William Miller and the Adventist movement of the mid-1800s, including [Seventh-day Adventists](#), [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), and other Adventist groups. However, a number of evangelical theologians, including Anglican [John Stott](#), Church of Christ elder [Edward Fudge](#), [Open Theists](#) [Clark Pinnock](#) and [John Sanders](#), as well as Philip Edgecombe Hughes and others have offered support for the doctrine, touching off a heated debate within mainstream evangelical Christianity.

Since the 1960s, Annihilationism seems to be gaining as a legitimate minority opinion within modern, conservative Protestant theology. It has found support and acceptance among some British evangelicals, although viewed with greater suspicion by their American counterparts.

## Popular advocates

- [Clark Pinnock](#)
- [Edward Fudge](#)

## Further reading

### Favorable

- David L. Edwards and [John Stott](#), *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988)
- Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1982)
- [Clark Pinnock](#), "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (Spring 1990). [\[1\]](#)
- Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: The Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1965), a Seventh-Day Adventist view
- Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

### Critical

- Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire : Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) [ISBN 0310240417](#)
- John H. Gerstner, *Repent or Perish: With a Special Reference to the Conservative Attack on Hell* (Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990) [ISBN 187761114X](#)
- Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984) [ISBN 0871234335](#)
- William G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1986) [ISBN 0851517544](#)
- Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 1995) [ISBN 0875523722](#)

- [Harry Buis - The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment](#)

#### Notes

1. [↑ Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell](#), by Alan W. Gomes
2. [↑](#) Glenn Peoples, "Has Robert Peterson Defeated Annihilationism?", *Journal Of The Evangelical Theological Society* (Dec 2006): 26-28. [PDF](#)
3. [↑](#) William Crockett in *Four Views on Hell*, p. 68
4. [↑](#) William Crockett in *Four Views on Hell*, p. 63
5. [↑](#) Millard J. Erickson, Is Hell Forever?  
[http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article\\_hell\\_erickson.html](http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_hell_erickson.html)
6. [↑](#) Glenn Peoples, Fire And Flood, <http://www.afterlife.co.nz/articles-reviews/fire-and-flood>
7. [↑](#) St. Justin Martyr: *Dialogue with Trypho* (Chapter V) -  
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-dialoguetrypho.html>
8. [↑](#) Ignatius Of Antioch: 'The Epistle Of Ignatius to the Magnesians' -  
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0105.htm>
9. [↑](#) Arnobius, *Against the Heathen*: Book II, paragraph 61, last sentence
10. [↑](#) [Champions of Conditional Immortality](#)

#### See also

- [Hell](#)
- [Intermediate state](#)

#### External links

- [Resources](#)
- [Evangelical Annihilationism in Review](#) by [J. I. Packer](#)
- [Unless Jesus Says Otherwise, Hell Exists, Asserts Evangelical Report](#), by Cedric Pulford
- [United Kingdom: Hell Isn't Obsolete, Brits Say](#), by Religion News Service
- [Directions: Is Hell Forever?](#)
- [Undying Worm, Unquenchable Fire](#), by Robert A. Peterson
- [Destroyed For Ever: An Examination of the Debates Concerning Annihilation and Conditional Immortality](#), by Tony Gray
- [The Doctrine of Immortality in The Early Church](#) by John H. Roller

#### Favorable / sympathetic



- [Grave Errors about Death](#) and other articles for the Annihilationist position at a Seventh-Day Adventist site.
- [Fire And Flood: How the New Testament uses the First testament to Speak on Final Punishment](#) by Glenn Peoples.
- [Conditionalism: A Cornerstone of Adventist Doctrine](#) by Tim Crosby ([Ministry Magazine, August 1986, pp. 16-18.](#))
- [Hell: Eternal Torment Or Annihilation?](#) from *Immortality or Resurrection?* by Samuele Bacchiocchi / 7th Day Adventist
- [Has Robert Peterson Defeated Annihilationism?](#) by Glenn Peoples, *Journal Of The Evangelical Theological Society*
- [Hell Revisited!](#) by Rev. C.Peter Collinson, retired Baptist pastor and Bible College lecturer; reformed, charismatic.
- [Interview: Scholar Edward Fudge on Alternative Third View of Hell](#), by Michelle A. Vu

#### Critical

- [Annihilationism](#) by B. B. Warfield
- [Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell Pt.1](#) by Alan W. Gomes
- [Evangelicals and the Annihilation of Hell Pt.2](#) by Alan W. Gomes
- [The Hermeneutics of Annihilationalism: The Theological Method of Edward Fudge](#), by Robert A. Peterson
- [A Critical Review of "The Fire That Consumes"](#) (PDF), by Biblaridion.