

Hell: The Final Punishment of the Wicked

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Introduction

The subject of hell is one of the most controversial topics in and out of Christianity. Christians themselves are by no means unanimous in their understanding of this subject. In general, there are three major ways of approaching the topic. First, the traditional and most popular view is that hell is a place of punishment of the wicked, who will be miraculously preserved throughout eternity in order to feel the agony of the flames because of their sins. A second view, sometimes called the metaphorical view, is that fire is not associated with hell at all, but that hell is a place of consciousness in which the wicked will be forever miserable as they realize their complete and utter separation from God. In this view, the pain is more mental anguish than it is physical in nature. This view is partly based on the fact that the grave, fire, and darkness are all used to describe the punishment of the wicked, allegedly requiring that they all be interpreted as metaphors. Finally, the minority, annihilationist view is that hell will involve a fire so hot that it completely burns up the wicked, who will then cease to exist. The traditional and metaphorical views incorporate the notion that the alleged immortal souls of the wicked who have died are already suffering in hell, and that after the resurrection, the whole person (body and soul) will resume the eternal process of suffering. By contrast, the annihilationist view understands that hell-fire will destroy the wicked as entire beings only after the final judgment at the end-time.

In this paper, we will explore the subject of hell, or the punishment of the wicked, by examining the following vital elements of the Biblical data: (1) the words translated as *hell* in both the Old and New Testaments; (2) when the wicked receive their punishment; (3) the meaning of *unquenchable* fire; (4) the meaning of *everlasting*, or *eternal*, fire; (5) the undying worm; (6) the meaning of being *tormented day and night*; (7) the plain statements about the final disposition of the wicked; and (8) the relationship of hell to the character of God.

Old and New Testament Words Translated as *Hell*

The English word *hell* occurs 54 times in the King James Version of the Bible, where it is either translated from one Hebrew word or from one of three Greek words. Below is an outline of the four Biblical language words from which *hell* is translated:

Sheol

This is the only Hebrew word from which *hell* is translated in the Old Testament. It occurs 65 times in the Old Testament, where it is translated (by the KJV) 31 times as *hell*, 31 times as *grave*, and 3 times as *pit*. In every place that it is translated as *hell*, the word *grave* would make perfect

sense. For example, in Ezekiel 32:27, it is said that some *have gone down to hell with their weapons of war; they have laid their swords under their heads, but their iniquities will be on their bones*. Obviously, weapons of war do not themselves go to hell as a place of punishment, but they can go into the grave along with the soldier's bones. Another strong argument that *Sheol* is not a place of punishment is the testimony of passages like Ecclesiastes 9:2-10, which plainly state that both the righteous and the wicked go to *Sheol* at death. This would not be the case if it were a place of punishment for the wicked.

Many traditionalist scholars cite Isaiah 14:9-11 as proof that the souls of the wicked are conscious in *Sheol* because it describes the dead kings sitting on their thrones and conversing with each other. However, souls or spirits are incapable of sitting on thrones, and the maggots and worms of verse 11 are creatures that eat dead flesh. These verses are part of a larger section of Hebrew poetry (vv. 4-11) in which the king of Babylon is the subject of taunting by trees that rejoice over his fall (v. 8). Naturally, trees cannot literally taunt anyone. By these facts, we conclude that this passage is most definitely not describing *Sheol* as a place of punishment. Rather, this is a highly figurative description of Babylon's defeat at God's hands as He lays its king into the grave, where he can no longer exercise his arrogant power. [NOTE: Ezekiel 32:21 is part of a similar figurative account against the Pharaoh of Egypt and his multitudes in chapters 31-32.]

Hades

This Greek word was used among the pagan Greeks to denote the underworld of the dead and sometimes as a name of the god who ruled the place. It was divided into two regions, a place where the dead went to immediately upon death, and a deeper region called Tartarus (or Tartaroo), although later Greek mythology used this latter region as a synonym for all of Hades. One should be careful not to assume that the New Testament writers believed in the pagan notion of Hades just because they sometimes used that word. In fact, *Hades* occurs 11 times in the New Testament, where the KJV translates it as *hell* 10 times and as *grave* one time (I Corinthians 15:55). Scholars recognize that this Greek word is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *Sheol*. Therefore, its basic meaning is simply the grave. For example, in Acts 2:27 (cf. v. 31), Peter referred to Psalms 16:10 and translated the *Sheol* of that text as *Hades*, where it obviously refers to the grave. Furthermore, Revelation 20:14 states that at the end of the millennium, then *Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire*. Clearly, *Hades* means the grave because of its close association with *Death* and because translating it as a place of punishment would be ludicrous in this context since the lake of

fire is itself the place of punishment.

Gehenna

This Greek word occurs 12 times in the New Testament (where it is always translated *hell* by the KJV) and is a transliteration of *ge Hinnom*, which is Hebrew for *the valley of Hinnom*, a garbage dump outside the city of Jerusalem toward the southwest where God's people had sometimes sacrificed children to Molech and committed other abominable practices (II Kings 23:10; II Chronicles 28:3). Because of those practices, the Valley of Hinnom became the symbol of the *Valley of Slaughter* of God's wrath (Jeremiah 7:31-34). A fire was always burning in *Gehenna* as new fuel in the form of garbage, dead animals, and certain human corpses were always being added to it. In Christ's day, the worst criminals were refused burial after execution and were thrown into this dump. The Jews thought of the people thrown there as eternally lost, signifying no hope of a resurrection for them. What a fitting term to use in the New Testament to describe the final punishment of the wicked! But please notice that only dead corpses were thrown into *Gehenna*. No one still living was ever cast into that place. Thus, *Gehenna* was not a place of eternal conscious torment for anyone, but a place where dead bodies eventually burned up and rotted into the soil. Indeed, Jesus warned in Matthew 10:28 that we should *fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna]*. This text completely shatters the credibility of the popular interpretation that either the body or the soul or both are consciously being tormented in hell.

Tartaroo

This Greek word, referring in Greek mythology to the abode of the dead as a dark abyss, occurs only in II Peter 2:4 in the New Testament, where it is translated as *hell*: *For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.* The Greek textual evidence is decidedly in favor of reading *pits* where some translations read *chains*. In Greek mythology Tartarus was a very deep pit that was both a place of torment and also a prison for Titans (elder gods who once ruled the world but were overthrown by Zeus).

Two facts in the context indicate that *Tartaroo* is being used in a figurative sense here. First, fallen angels are not now literally dead, nor are they yet burning in the flames of hell. Second, the fallen angels were cast to the earth, according to Revelation 12:7-9. Therefore, *Tartaroo* is used here figuratively to represent the entire world, which undoubtedly is a place of darkness in contrast to the glorious light of heaven, from which they had been cast. The context further demonstrates that *Tartaroo* is being used here as the place where the fallen angels are being held in a state of condemnation while they are waiting for the day of judgment.

The parallel text in Jude 6 sheds more light: *the angels who did not keep their own domain, but*

left their own abode, He [God] has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day. First, both texts say that these angels are not now being punished but are being reserved for judgment. Jude's Greek word for *chains* does mean *chains* or *bonds*. Second, this is figurative language because there is no such thing as a literal *chain of darkness*. Therefore, they were not thrown into any literal pit or any literal prison but to this earth, which in contrast to the brilliance of heaven must seem like a pit of darkness. Furthermore, fire is not even mentioned at all.

We therefore conclude that of all the Biblical words for *hell*, only *gehenna* is a place of fire, but the fire did not go out only because new garbage was always being added—strong evidence that hell is not a place of eternal torment.

Our study of the four Biblical words translated *hell* in the Scriptures reveals startling evidence that contradicts both of the more popular views of hell in the Christian world today. When used to describe a literal place, it simply refers to the grave where the whole person is buried. In only 12 cases is it referring to a place of burning fire. Even there (*Gehenna*) the persons cast into it were executed first. This is strong evidence that hell is not a place of conscious eternal torment for the wicked, whether of fire or of mental anguish.

When the Wicked are Punished

In Matthew 16:27, Jesus Himself proclaimed that when *the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works*. This truth is confirmed in Revelation 22:12, in which Jesus repeats this thought in the following way: *And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work*. Matthew 25:31-46 also associates the rewarding of both the righteous and the wicked with the Second Coming of Jesus (especially vv. 31, 41, 46). In Matthew 13:40-42, the wicked are said to be destroyed by fire *at the end of this age*, an event connected to the Second Coming of Jesus in Matthew 24 (vv. 14, 30-31). Jesus also predicted that *the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day* (John 12:48). In other words, it was the clear teaching of Jesus that He will bring His reward for people with Him when He returns in glory, implicitly meaning that no one will receive the punishment for his sins (or the reward of bliss for belonging to Jesus) until Christ's Second Coming. Furthermore, the statement in Matthew 25:41 that *the everlasting fire [is] prepared for the devil and his angels* implies that if they are not in that hell-fire yet, and that fire is prepared for them, then no wicked *people* have entered there yet either.

Christ's statements quoted above seem to suggest that the wicked receive their final punishment in hell-fire at His Second Coming. However, Revelation 20:5-9 clarifies that the fiery punishment of all the wicked will not occur until after the millennium. At that time they are resurrected to face the "great white throne judgment and destruction by fire. It is also at that time that Satan is thrown

into the lake of fire (v. 10), which must be the *everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels* (Matthew 25:41). Therefore, we conclude that the Lord will bring His rewards with Him at His Second Coming in the sense that the separation of the righteous from the wicked locks both groups into their final rewards—not that the wicked actually receive their reward at that time.

The apostle Peter echoed Jesus when he spoke about the Lord knowing how *to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment* (II Peter 2:9). The phrase *under punishment* in that verse does not mean that the wicked dead are currently being punished while they wait for a final punishment on the day of judgment because of Peter's statement in the next chapter that *the heavens and the earth...are...reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men* (II Peter 3:7). Verses 10-13 of chapter 3 explain that on the day of the Lord *the heavens will pass away...and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up*. Of course, until that day, the heavens and the earth are being reserved, meaning that they are not being cleansed at the present time. Likewise, the reserving of the wicked does not involve any current punishment from God; rather, they are being reserved under the sentence of punishment (their punishment is certain even though it is being delayed until the day of judgment).

Unquenchable Fire

At least 9 times in Scripture reference is made to fires which cannot be quenched. In Mark 9:43-48. Greek textual evidence is strong that verses 44 and 46 are not in the original text, and that verse 45 does not include the words *into the fire that shall never be quenched*. However, verses 43 and 48 do contain the language about hell-fire being unquenchable. The Hebrew and Greek words for quenchable and unquenchable mean what they do in English—with reference to fire, it means that the fire can be put out and cannot be put out, respectively. However, once the fuel has been exhausted, the fire naturally goes out.

Jeremiah 17:27 prophesied that Jerusalem would one day burn, *and it shall not be quenched*. That fire is described as that which *shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem*. In other words, the fire would eventually go out once it has completed its destruction. II Chronicles 36:19-21 specifically says that the destruction of Jerusalem at that time was the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy and that the Babylonians *burned all its palaces with fire* (v. 19) in 586 B.C. Jerusalem is obviously no longer burning from those Babylonian fires now. Therefore, the unquenchable fire which will destroy the wicked at the end-time is unquenchable because it will not go out until it consumes all of its fuel (Isaiah 1:28, 31; 34:10; 66:24; Jeremiah 21:12; Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17; Mark 9:43). Thus, the expression concerning unquenchable fire definitely do not teach that the duration of the fire is endless and eternal, only that no one will be able to put it out. Isaiah 1:31 is a good example in which unquenchable fire will result in the *destruction of transgressors...[who] shall be consumed* (v. 28).

Everlasting or Eternal Fire

What about the terms *everlasting* fire or *eternal* fire? Surely, those must refer to fire that will burn endlessly throughout eternity or else the plain meaning of the language is voided. At least 4 times in Scripture the words everlasting or eternal are used to describe the fire that destroys the wicked: Isaiah 33:14; Matthew 18:8; 25:41; and Jude 7. Before examining each one of them, let us first look at the Hebrew and Greek words often translated as *everlasting*, *eternal*, or *forever*.

The Hebrew word *olam* and the Greek word *aionios* each means *perpetual* or *lasting for an age*. But the duration of that age is determined by the length of time of the object that it is describing. For example, *aionios* was often used of the Roman emperors to indicate that they held office for life. Certainly, no Roman emperor is on the throne today for there is no Roman Empire. Let us look at some examples from Scripture. In Leviticus 25:46 and Deuteronomy 15:17 slaves are said to belong to their masters *forever*. But of course none of those slaves in ancient Israel is still serving their master. Hannah pledged that her son Samuel would serve in the tabernacle *forever* (I Samuel 1:22), which she defined for *as long as he lives* (v. 28). Jonah testified that he was in the belly of the great fish *forever* (Jonah 2:6).

Notice the use of the Greek word *ainonios*, which is translated as eternal in several New Testament passages. In Hebrews 9:12, *Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his [Christ's] own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us* (KJV). The correct interpretation must be that the effects of redemption are eternal since Christ's work of redemption was the offering of Himself as a sacrifice once (Hebrews 9:26, 28; 10:10). The same is true of *eternal salvation* (Hebrews 5:9).

Now let us look at the four passages that speak of the punishment of the wicked as being everlasting or eternal. In Isaiah 33:14 the poetic parallelism illustrates the meaning:

Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?

Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?

Clearly, this parallelism equates *everlasting burnings* with *devouring fire*. Because a devouring fire is one which devours, or completely destroys, what it burns, the nature of the *everlasting burnings* is that in which the *results* of the destruction are everlasting, not that the fire will never go out.

In Jude 7 and II Peter 2:6, what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah is used as an example of what the wicked will later suffer. Jude says those cities are *suffering the vengeance of eternal fire*, while Peter says they were *burned to ashes*. In this way, eternal fire must refer to the fact that the consequences of the fire are eternal—not the duration of the fire.

These clear passages must be used to properly interpret the other references to everlasting fire. A reading of Matthew 18:8-9 reveals that the *everlasting fire* of verse 8 is equivalent to the *hell fire* of verse 9. Like the *everlasting fire* of Matthew 25:41, the fire burns up the wicked and its results (the death of the wicked) are eternal in nature because it represents the *second death*, from which there will be no resurrection (Revelation 20:14).

Eternal Torment/Smoke Ascending Forever

Revelation 14:11 and 20:10 speak of torment and smoke of the wicked's torment ascending forever. This language comes from Isaiah 34. First, it is important to note that Isaiah 34, like much of that book, is written in Hebrew poetry, which is designed to paint word pictures, with its details not necessarily being taken literally. Second, we know they should not be interpreted literally there because much of that chapter speaks about various animals and plants living in the very place whose smoke ascends forever and ever—which would be literally impossible if fire and smoke were still present. So we must conclude that this poetic language of smoke ascending forever and ever is an idiom that refers to complete destruction. Since the torment is connected with the ascending smoke in Revelation 14:10, then it too is an idiom for complete destruction, a fact confirmed by Revelation 20:9's statement that *fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them*.

The Undying Worm

Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:48 both state in connection with the final punishment of the wicked that their worm does not die. Many scholars interpret the worm here as a symbol of the immortal soul of the wicked, which allegedly does not die in the flames of hell. However, the word for *hell* in Mark 9 is *gehenna*, which we observed earlier was a place of burning into which already dead corpses were thrown. Therefore, the worms are actually maggots, which literally fed on the dead bodies in the garbage dump outside the city of Jerusalem. And surely no one is going to argue that maggots are immortal! The worm never dies in the same sense that the fire was always burning in *gehenna*—because dead bodies and other garbage were continuously being thrown into that place, providing a steady supply of new fuel for the fires to burn and the maggots to feast upon.

By contrast, the final punishment of the wicked has a finality, or end, to its process. Therefore, the fuel will eventually run out, and the fire will then go out. The only viable conclusion is to view this as picturesque language depicting the reality that the wicked will be completely and utterly destroyed.

The Punishment of Satan

It is more than interesting to note that the Bible teaches that Satan himself will be utterly destroyed

in the end. Ezekiel 28:12-19 uses the king of Tyrus (or Tyre) as a type of Satan himself; note that verses 13-16 obviously cannot refer to the literal king of Tyre, but only to Satan, because of its references to this being having been in Eden and having been the anointed cherub in God's very presence. The passage speaks clearly in the following language of Satan's final end as being complete destruction rather than an endless eternity spent in some hellish place of burning:

I destroyed you, O covering cherub (v. 16)

Therefore I brought fire from your midst; it devoured you (v. 18)

I turned you to ashes upon the earth (v. 18)

You...shall be no more forever (v. 19)

The past tense in the first three clauses is an example of the prophetic past, in which a future event is so certain that the Lord refers to it as having already occurred even though it has not yet literally done so. And in four different ways, the prophet makes it clear that Satan will be utterly and completely destroyed so that he *shall be no more forever*.

Surely, if anyone deserves to burn in hell for an endless eternity, it is Satan himself, for it was he who instigated this entire rebellion against God and was successful in getting mankind to follow his leadership. But if *he* will not be placed in an eternal hell, then it is utterly inconceivable that God will do that to *any* wicked humans because any sense of justice demands the conclusion that Satan deserves that punishment more than anyone he has deceived. Therefore, all of the wicked will be annihilated in the lake of fire after the millennium (Revelation 20:7-15).

Jesus Suffered the Punishment of Hell for Us

If you wish to know what God's love is, you need look no further than at the cross, for that was the most supreme act of love that will ever be witnessed by the universe. At the same time, Calvary showed the universe the wrath of God against sin as well because Jesus was treated as we deserve that we might be treated as He deserves. In other words, God's justice and love kissed each other at Calvary. On the cross, Jesus tasted *death for everyone* (Hebrews 2:9) as He became *the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world* (I John 2:2). His punishment was for the sins of the whole world, which means that He suffered the second death of hell fire (Revelation 20:14). Although His punishment was infinite in quality, it was *finite* in duration. Yet teachers of an eternal hell would have us believe that it takes an eternity to punish each individual wicked being for his sins.

Plain Bible Statements about the Punishment of the Wicked

One of the most important and common-sense principles that will help us correctly understand the Bible is to interpret the more obscure passages of Scripture by the plain passages, not the other

way around. Fortunately, there is no shortage of texts that plainly lay out the final destiny that awaits the wicked. These plain statements make it abundantly clear that the wicked will be burned up, totally consumed, and then cease to exist. The following list is comprehensive and representative of both the Old and New Testaments, but it is not exhaustive:

- Job 21:30, 32—*the wicked are reserved for the day of doom [destruction]...the grave*
- Psalm 21:9—*fire shall devour them*
- Psalm 37:10—*the wicked shall be no more*
- Psalm 37:20—*the wicked shall perish...into smoke they shall vanish away*
- Psalm 37:38—*the transgressors shall be destroyed...cut off*
- Psalm 68:2—*let the wicked perish at the presence of God*
- Psalm 97:1-3—*fire...burns up His [God's] enemies*
- Psalm 104:35—*May sinners be consumed from the earth, and the wicked be no more*
- Psalm 112:10—*The wicked...will gnash his teeth and melt away*
- Psalm 145:20—*all the wicked He [God] will destroy*
- Proverbs 13:9—*the lamp of the wicked will be put out*
- Isaiah 1:28—*those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed*
- Isaiah 13:9—*He [God] will destroy its sinners from it [the land]*
- Isaiah 66:15-16—*with flames of fire...the slain of the Lord shall be many*
- Ezekiel 18:4—*The soul who sins shall die*
- Joel 1:15—*the day of the Lord...shall come as destruction from the Almighty*
- Obadiah 16—*all the nations...shall be as though they had never been*

- Zephaniah 1:14-18—*The great day of the Lord...He will make speedy riddance of [the wicked]*
- Malachi 4:1—*all who do wickedly will be stubble...the day which is coming shall burn them up*
- Malachi 4:3—*they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet*
- Matthew 3:17—*He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire* [Chaff literally burns up.]
- Matthew 21:44—*will grind him to powder*
- Luke 3:17—*the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire* [Chaff literally burns up.]
- Luke 19:27—*slay them before me*
- Philippians 3:18-19—*the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction*
- I Thessalonians 5:2-3—*the day of the Lord...then sudden destruction comes upon them*
- II Peter 2:12—*will utterly perish in their own corruption*
- Revelation 20:9—*fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them*

All attempts to interpret these and similar statements as figurative deny the plain meaning of words in a literal context.

Other Arguments for Annihilation

In addition to the testimony of Scripture presented thus far, there are other Biblical arguments for the annihilation of the wicked in hell-fire at the end-time.

First, the Bible expressly contrasts the two fates of the righteous and the wicked as life versus death. Romans 6:23 is representative of Bible passages which teach this truth: *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* It is difficult to conceive of any text being clearer in declaring that the choice is between death or life. But both the traditional and metaphorical views of hell contradict this text by presenting the choice as between eternal life with Christ or eternal life in hell. Eternal life means life; in the context of the verse, and death is eternal death. The results of both last forever and ever without end. Jesus taught the same truth in Matthew 7:13-14, where He contrasted *destruction* with *life*. And in the most famous

Bible text of all, John 3:16, our Savior plainly stated *that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*. Thus, the choice is between perishing or receiving everlasting life. These texts simply leave no room for a continued conscious existence in hell for the wicked.

Second, the Bible literally leaves no geographical space for an eternal hell. Proverbs 11:31 teaches that the reward of both the righteous and the wicked is here on this earth: *If the righteous will be recompensed on the earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner*. This means that if the wicked are suffering in an eternal hell, that hell must be somewhere on earth. But where is it now? Even more importantly, where will it be after the final judgment? Those who believe in an eternal hell understand that the whole person—body and soul—will be placed there after the resurrection at the end-time. A physical body must occupy physical space. Therefore, one cannot get by with some theory that hell is in some other dimension, where it is both invisible and non-physical.

The problem with an eternal hell on earth is that it contradicts the Biblical teaching that the earth will be destroyed and completely remade after the millennium. Specifically, Isaiah 65:17, II Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21:1 all declare that there will be a new heaven and a new Earth, with the latter text providing the context that this will occur just after the end of the millennium. Furthermore, Revelation 21:4 says that in this new earth tears, death, sorrow, crying, and pain will be among *the former things [which] have passed away*. If tears, sorrow, crying, and pain have all been destroyed in the process of making the new earth, then hell, with its sorrow and pain (whether physical or mental) for the wicked, cannot still exist. It too must have been destroyed.

Hell and the Character of God

Perhaps the most basic argument over the issue of an eternal hell is how such a punishment relates to the character of God. A number of scholars insist that a just God must punish sinners in an endless torture chamber because sin represents rebellion against an infinite God. Thus, the punishment must also be infinite in duration. On the other hand, a growing number of scholars are rethinking their position on hell because of their concern that an eternal hell is incompatible with a God of love. Obviously, the character issue is fundamental to what one thinks about hell.

God is Just

Both sides in this debate agree that the Scriptures declare God to be just, or righteous. In a rhetorical question, Job 4:17 asks, *Can a mortal be more righteous [just] than God?* Indeed, *righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your [God's] throne* (Psalm 89:14). Even the New Testament clearly speaks of the attribute of righteousness or justice. Jesus Himself testified that *My judgment is righteous* (John 5:30). Three times in the book of Acts, Jesus was called the *Just* or *Just One* (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14). Those who gain the victory over the mark of the beast will proclaim, *Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints* (Revelation 15:3).

God's justice is the reason that He will *by no means [clear] the guilty* (Exodus 34:7). In other words, justice demands that impenitent sinners face God's righteous judgment and be punished for their sins. There must be a final accounting for those who have spurned God's offer of salvation. But can a process of punishment which never ends actually bring justice? The notion that the punishment should fit the crime is an almost universally held principle in the world today (although not always implemented), and for good reason. A criminal is punished as a response to his particular crime. Therefore, it is only fair that the severity of the punishment approximate the severity of the crime. For this reason, for example, it is considered a breach of justice to execute a criminal for petty theft.

This principle was sometimes called *retaliation in kind* or *an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*. Whenever it was instituted in human history it replaced the old system of personal vengeance, which tended to produce excessive punishments and to breed a cycle of violence as the relatives of an offender sought revenge for the punishment. The Code of Hammurabi, the greatest king of Old Babylonia, introduced this principle to ancient Mesopotamia. And God Himself later instructed Israel to include it within their criminal justice system, according to Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; and Deuteronomy 19:21. Therefore, it bears the stamp of divine approval. Clearly, the sentencing of a *finite* sinner to any kind of punishment of *infinite* duration would violate this principle of justice. Thus, it would be unjust. Is it really just to punish a pickpocket longer than a mass murderer simply because the former died and allegedly went to hell several centuries earlier than the latter? For God to cast anyone into an eternal hell, then, would make Him far worse a tyrannical monster than all the human monsters who have ever lived. And He would then owe apologies to the likes of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and Chairman Mao.

Justice demands that the punishment must fit the crime. Certainly, the person whose primary guilt was a refusal to accept God's plan of salvation does not deserve the same degree of punishment as the one who took great satisfaction in inflicting suffering and death on others. In His parable of the faithful servant and the evil servant (Luke 12:35-48), in the very context of discussing punishment at the end-time, Jesus declared the following principle:

And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47-48).

On this basis, therefore, it is our position that some will burn longer than others in the lake of fire, depending upon their degree of knowledge and guilt. Naturally, as instigator of all evil in the universe, Satan will burn the longest. However, in the end, even he will be consumed by the flames of hell-fire and *shall be no more forever* (Ezekiel 28:19).

God is Love

Not only does an eternal hell pervert God's justice, it also violates His love. Christians know that God is not just a loving God; He is Love personified (I John 4:8, 16). And Jesus, who is *the express image of His person* [God the Father] (Hebrews 1:3) and in *whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead* (Colossians 2:9), not only taught His followers *to Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you* (Luke 6:27; cf. Matthew 5:44), but also lived it during the most trying time of His own life. While dying on the cross, our Savior cried out concerning those who crucified Him, *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do* (Luke 23:34). In fact, Jesus did not come into the world to condemn people to hell, *For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved* (John 3:17). In addition to Christ's life, we have the plain testimony of Scripture that God truly desires all people to be saved even though His justice will not permit that because of the human response to Him. *For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies, says the Lord God. Therefore turn and live!* (Ezekiel 18:32; cf. 18:23; 33:11; I Timothy 2:3-4; II Peter 3:9).

God as Love personified would not terrorize even the vilest sinner throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity no matter how wicked his life may have been. Instead, this kind of God will surely have tears in His eyes and sorrow in His heart even as He must execute sentence on the unrepentant wicked. Indeed, executing people is so foreign to God's desires for His creation that the final punishment of the wicked is called God's *unusual act* (Isaiah 28:21). [NOTE: Verse 22 makes it clear that the final punishment of all the wicked at the end-time is meant because in the same context it refers to a *destruction determined even upon the whole earth.*]

No Wrath of God?

From chapter 6 you may recall those Christians who have adopted the Moral Influence view of the atonement. They so emphasize that *God is love* (I John 4:8, 16) that they have redefined His wrath as merely turning aside from the willful sinner and allowing him to reap the natural consequences of his sin. Since sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), we cut ourselves off from the Life-Giver and naturally die. For such people God is a *consuming fire* (Hebrews 12:29) which naturally results in willful sinners being consumed. This is the reason that the wicked are killed (naturally) as the result of the brightness of Jesus' glory at His return (II Thessalonians 1:8-10; 2:8). Therefore, as applied to the punishment of hell, these Christians are emphatic that God does not kill anyone; people and the evil angels simply reap the natural consequences of their choice and die as a result.

This view also redefines God's justice as simply His willingness to turn sorrowfully away and allowing people to reap the natural consequences of their choice. However, the redefinition of God's wrath and His justice represents an unbalanced view of God's character. For example, Deuteronomy 33:21 associates God's *justice* with His *judgments*, which are *administered*.

Jeremiah 23:5 says the Messiah will *execute judgment (justice)*. These texts indicate more than merely a turning away sorrowfully from the persistent wicked. In Isaiah 56:1 justice is something to be *kept* and is associated with *doing* righteousness. In other words, there is nothing passive about true justice. Furthermore, Romans 6:23 teaches that *the wages of sin is death*. Wages are something that people earn and that are paid to a person by someone else. Therefore, when we look at the Scriptures themselves to define God's justice, we simply cannot conclude that it is merely passive but that it involves a direct administering or executing of that which is just or righteous.

When it comes to the punishment of the wicked, therefore, God will directly apply justice by paying the wicked the spiritual wages they earned and justly deserve. The Scriptures teach that God will execute *vengeance* on the wicked (Deuteronomy 32:35; Isaiah 34:8; Romans 12:19), and the word *vengeance* denotes a direct punishment for wrongdoing. It is true that God does not do this capriciously or arbitrarily but sorrowfully respects the decision of the wicked. Moreover, by separating themselves from God, He does become a consuming fire and they die apart from the Life-Giver. But His justice involves an act of judicial execution of judgment on those who have been "convicted" of high-handed crimes against God and His people. He does indeed love the sinner, but His justice and natural wrath against sin means that He must execute justice in the earth.

We see God's active justice and wrath against sin is all over the Scriptures, and it involved the execution of the death penalty, as the following partial list reflects:

- In Genesis 6:5-7 God sent a global Flood because of mankind's wickedness. Note that in verse 7 He said, *I will destroy man*. That cannot be rationalized as a passive wrath in which the wicked themselves or Satan send the Flood.
- In Genesis 19:1-25 God directly *rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah*. This destruction was a type of the destruction of the wicked at the end of the world (Jude 6-7).
- At the first Passover in Egypt, the Lord Himself killed the firstborn in all of Egypt in the homes of those who did not place the blood of a lamb on the doorposts and lintels (Exodus 11:4-5; 12:29-30; 12:12-13) and called it an execution of judgment (12:12).
- God Himself instructed the nation of Israel to establish the death penalty; in fact, He did so for mankind in general right after the Flood when there was no nation of Israel (Genesis 9:5-6)—Exodus 21:12-17; Leviticus 24:10-23; Deuteronomy 19:21. This was to be administered on the basis of the punishment fitting the crime (Exodus 21:23-25), which even secular societies recognize as an important principle of a just criminal justice system.

- In the days of Assyrian King Sennacherib, God Himself *killed in the camp of the Assyrians 185,000 soldiers* (II Kings 19:35; cf. Isaiah 37:36).
- After the Great White Throne Judgment at the end of the millennium (Revelation 20:11-12), fire will come *down from God out of heaven and devoured them* (the wicked, v. 9). Again this is not a passive turning away but a final execution of a just sentence from the judgment.

God does not, and will not, enjoy His work of executing judgment or justice on the wicked. That is the reason that Scripture calls it *His unusual act* (Isaiah 28:21-22), with the Hebrew word for *unusual* meaning *foreign* or *strange*. But strange or not, God does take this action. Therefore, it simply is untrue to say that God never kills.

Conclusion

Summarized below are the major abbreviated reasons why we reject the doctrine of eternal torment and instead understand the Bible to teach the ultimate annihilation of the wicked at the end-time:

- Of the 4 original Biblical words translated as *hell*, 2 refer to the grave (*Sheol* and *Hades*), 1 is a metaphor for the earth (*tartaroo*), and only 1 (*gehenna*) refers to a place of fire. But the original *gehenna* was a garbage dump outside the ancient city of Jerusalem into which garbage and certain dead corpses were thrown. Thus, there is no support for any consciousness of people in hell.
- Contrary to the metaphorical view of hell as an isolated place where the wicked suffer mental anguish, reference to hell as the grave is not to a place of punishment but a place where both the righteous and the wicked go at death. There are too many references to fire and complete destruction for the word *gehenna* to be a metaphor. Darkness is a metaphor, however.
- Unquenchable fire simply means that no one can put it out. But all fire will eventually die out after it has consumed all of the available fuel.
- The Biblical words *everlasting* and *eternal* describe that which lasts *for an age*, which is limited in duration according to what it is describing. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is used as a type of the destruction of the wicked at the end-time. Its *eternal fire* (Jude 7) is no longer burning, but the results of the fire are eternal.
- According to a comparison with other Scriptures, the references to *no rest day nor night* (Revelation 14:11) and *tormented day and night* (Revelation 20:10) are examples of

figurative language indicating complete destruction.

- References to an undying worm represent the picturesque language of maggots eating dead flesh in order to depict the reality that the wicked will be completely destroyed.
- Satan, if anyone, is the most deserving being in the entire universe to suffer in an eternal hell. But Ezekiel 28 uses 4 different expressions to make it abundantly clear that even he will eventually be devoured and cease to exist. If this is Satan's fate, then surely none of the human wicked will be sentenced to eternal torment either.
- Jesus suffered the punishment of hell for the sins of the whole world. Yet while it was infinite in quality, it was *finite* in *duration*. Thus, it does not take anywhere close to an eternity to mete out justice for even the vilest sinner who has ever lived.
- The plain statements of both the Old and New Testaments teach that the wicked will be devoured and then cease to exist.
- The Bible contrasts the fate of the righteous and wicked as life versus death. The doctrine of eternal torment perverts that teaching by making the contrast between *life* in heaven versus *life* in hell.
- The Bible states that the reward of the wicked will be on the earth. But there will be no room for hell anywhere on this planet after God completely remakes it into the new earth and removes all tears, sorrow, and pain (Revelation 21:1-4).
- The Biblical principle of justice, that the punishment must fit the crime, would be violated in the extreme by God if He were to sentence anyone to eternal torment. It would make God many times worse than all the human tyrants put together!
- A God who is the personification of Love is not a God who would keep anyone in endless torture.
- The metaphorical view of hell has all of the same problems as the traditional view.
- God's final punishment of the wicked is based on His character of love *and* justice, which is a direct, active execution of a just sentence on those who have been judged as guilty of willful and persistent sin.