

What does the Bible say about hell?

There is sometimes confusion about use of the term *hell* as the temporary gathering place of the dead (also known as [Sheol](#) or Hades). This article will focus on one common usage of the word *hell* as being synonymous with *the lake of fire*, the eternal place of punishment reserved for the lost.

If heaven is vastly misunderstood thanks to misconceptions and falsehoods perpetuated by myth and popular culture, the realities of hell are all the more misunderstood. Medieval art, fanciful literature, and biblical illiteracy may be the top three reasons why the average person's understanding of hell is clouded with ignorance and fallacies. Compounding the problem, many pastors and Bible teachers avoid discussing hell for fear of upsetting their congregants. Indeed, hell is a most unpleasant topic, but since our Lord Jesus taught on hell, we should not remain silent on the matter. According to the Bible, hell is real ([Mark 9:43](#)), it is where sinners are punished ([Matthew 5:22](#)), it is a place of torment ([Revelation 14:11](#)), and it is eternal ([Mark 9:48](#)). Hell was originally created for Satan and his angels ([Matthew 25:41](#)).

Dispelling some of the more prevalent myths about hell is useful in adding to our biblical understanding:

Myth 1: The devil's headquarters are in hell. The devil is not in hell now. Hell, or the lake of fire (also referred to as the second death), will receive its first occupants at the end of our Lord Jesus' millennial reign ([Revelation 20:7-10](#)). Also, hell is a place of torment ([Luke 16:23-24](#); [Revelation 20:10](#)), so cartoonish images of prancing devils brandishing pitchforks while merrily dancing around a ring of fire are nonsensical. Rather than partying with his legions of demons, Satan will languish in hell.

Myth 2: Hell is reserved solely for the worst of evildoers such as cruel dictators and serial killers. While there are likely degrees of eternal punishment ([Luke 12:47-49](#)), all who refuse God's mercy must endure His wrath ([John 3:18](#)). There is heaven, and there is hell; there is no third option. While this reality makes the average person uncomfortable, there will be more

unrepentant barbers, plumbers, middle school teachers, bricklayers, airline pilots, and accountants in hell than tyrants such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Stalin will not be sent to the [lake of fire](#) because he murdered millions of his own countrymen; rather, Stalin, like the unrepentant librarian, will suffer in hell because he scorned God's mercy and rejected Christ.

Myth 3: A loving God would not send people to hell. If, by "love," one is thinking of an indulgent, enabling, misguided sort of sentimental affection, then there would be no eternal punishment. But God is not to be confused with a drowsy old man who winks at his grandchildren's mischievous antics from a rocking chair. God is just ([Romans 12:19](#)), and He will repay evil with affliction ([2 Thessalonians 1:6](#)). Rather than accusing God of being cruel, we should remember hell is reserved for those who, by their own volition, snubbed God's mercy ([Hebrews 2:3](#)). Salvation is a gift free for the asking ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)), but the world is filled with those whose minds and hearts are so full of earthly matters they haven't any room for what God would gladly give them. Ultimately, hell will prove to be a place for those who were willing to settle for less than God's best.

Myth 4: A just God would not send people to hell. Of all the arguments against hell, this may be the weakest. Where else would a just God send rebels who stubbornly and steadfastly refused to repent of their evil? Even in our own sometimes corrupt criminal justice system, lawbreakers are sent to prison. Should a just God reward hardened evildoers with eternal bliss? The Judge of all the earth will do what is right ([Genesis 18:25](#)). Additionally, those who will occupy hell will be those who avoided contact, companionship, and communication with the One who made them. Why should we think the unrepentant sinner who ran from the presence of God here on earth would be happy in His intimate company in heaven?

In his usual pithy style, Christian writer and apologist [C. S. Lewis](#) explained, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'" (*The Great*

Divorce, Signature Classics, p. 339). Hell will be populated by people who chose to be there. To reject the Lord of heaven is to choose hell.

Myth 5: Hell is merely a scare tactic to enforce a particular brand of allegiance or behavior. If hell is real, then we will do well to fear it, and if hell is only a scare tactic, then might the same be said of warnings against tobacco use, drinking and driving, or income tax fraud? Jesus warned of the dangers of hell ([Matthew 10:28](#)). Would He have alerted us to the dangers of hell if the dangers were not real? Are those who deny hell's existence wiser, smarter, and better informed than the Son of God? To deny the perils of hell is to cast doubt on the words of our Savior.

Hell is a place of misery and suffering; hell is where torment and anguish never cease ([Revelation 14:11](#)). Whether the flames are literal or symbolic of some even greater woe, we can be certain that all this world has to offer—money, fame, reputation, power, or sexual gratification—is hardly worth the forfeiture of our eternal souls ([Mark 8:36–38](#)).

God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked ([Ezekiel 18:32](#)). He finds no satisfaction in those who choose hell over Him. On the contrary, God loved the world so much that He sent His Son to rescue and redeem us ([John 3:16](#)). Jesus' death and resurrection are good news for lost sinners willing to believe that our sin debt has been paid in full. Those who receive God's grace through faith will live forever with Him.

Jesus is the best God can give us. God has nothing greater to offer than His Son. Those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ have no reason to fear death and the grave; on the contrary, the best is yet to come. Yet there are those whose hearts are hardened and are more interested in gaining what the world has to offer. What a tragedy this is, for Christ has overcome sin, death, and hell on our behalf.

[What Is Hell? A Biblical Guide to Christian Teachings](#)

[What the Bible Says About Hell](#)

100 Bible Verses About Hell

100 Bible Verses about

What does Jesus teach about the nature of hell?

1. Terminology and Foundation

The New Testament uses several terms that are commonly translated as “hell.” One of the most frequent is “Gehenna” (e.g., [Matthew 10:28](#)). Gehenna, historically located in a valley near Jerusalem, was once associated with idolatrous practices ([2 Kings 23:10](#)) and later became a metaphor for final judgment. When Jesus speaks of “hell,” He often uses Gehenna to convey a place of ultimate, irreversible punishment.

Jesus also refers to “outer darkness” ([Matthew 8:12](#)) and uses vivid imagery like “the fiery furnace” ([Matthew 13:42](#)), emphasizing a serious and dreadful reality. These terms help us see that Jesus consistently presents hell as a real, conscious experience of punishment—an actual destination, not just a symbol or figure of speech.

2. Conscious Torment and Separation

In multiple passages, Jesus describes hell as a place of torment, separation from God, and just retribution for sin. One of the most graphic portrayals comes from [Luke 16:19-31](#), where He recounts the experience of a rich man in torment. This narrative includes the phrase “a great chasm has been fixed” ([Luke 16:26](#)), illustrating a permanent and impassable divide between the righteous and the unrighteous after death.

Jesus also uses the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” ([Matthew 25:30](#)), implying a conscious sorrow, regret, or anguish. Rather than hinting at mere annihilation, these statements underscore a continuing, conscious experience—one that reflects God’s justice and reveals the seriousness of unrepentant sin.

3. Everlasting Duration

In [Matthew 25:46](#), Jesus contrasts the final destinies of two groups: “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same Greek term often rendered “eternal” is used for both punishment and life,

suggesting that hell lasts as long as heaven endures. By equating their duration, He points to hell's everlasting nature. This eternal consequence is reinforced in passages like [Mark 9:48](#), describing it as a place "where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

These statements convey the weight of finality. While outside modern culture might diminish the severity of hell or reduce it to a metaphor, the language Jesus employs—the never-dying worm and unquenchable fire—indicates a persistent and definitive reality.

4. Perfect Justice and the Moral Order

Jesus shows that God's justice involves holding each person accountable for moral and spiritual choices. In [Matthew 12:36-37](#), He explains we will "give an account on the day of judgment." The concept of hell as described by Jesus is not arbitrary cruelty; rather, it underscores the moral order of a universe created by a just and holy God.

The justice of hell also highlights God's respect for human decisions. While He provides a way of salvation and offers forgiveness, Jesus depicts hell as the just end for those who reject divine grace. Thus, Christ's teachings on hell reinforce the seriousness of sin and the need for repentance, illustrating how God's righteousness necessitates a final reckoning.

5. Warnings and Urgency

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus issues warnings to prompt urgent repentance. In [Mark 9:43](#), He says: "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than ... be thrown into hell." This strong imagery does not condone self-harm; rather, it conveys the dire seriousness of sin and the need to eliminate stumbling blocks that separate us from God. It underscores that any sacrifice is worthwhile compared to the horror of ultimate judgment.

Jesus' repeated emphases on repentance, such as in [Luke 13:3](#)—"unless you repent, you too will all perish"—demonstrate that He does not delight in the destruction of the wicked. Instead, He compassionately warns seekers and skeptics alike, urging them to find refuge in God's mercy.

6. Alignment with Biblical and Historical Context

Outside the Gospels, the broader biblical witness aligns with Jesus' depiction of hell. Second Temple Jewish literature and contemporary sources (e.g., Josephus' writings) similarly describe a place of post-mortem punishment for the wicked. Archaeological findings in the Hinnom Valley, associated with Gehenna, reveal remnants of its dark historical use, reinforcing the stark illustration Jesus employed. The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered at Qumran, also contain references supporting a belief in a final judgment scenario where the righteous and unrighteous receive different fates.

Jesus' teachings on hell fit coherently with the entire biblical narrative: God creates, humanity rebels, God redeems, and finally, God judges. Manuscript evidence—for instance, from early papyri up to major codices such as Sinaiticus and Vaticanus—consistently preserves these teachings about divine justice. This textual uniformity underlines the reliability of the scriptural witness on judgment and the afterlife.

7. Spiritual and Emotional Dimensions

Though physical torment appears in Jesus' descriptions, the spiritual and emotional aspects also loom large. Hell involves an everlasting separation from God's loving presence, resulting in intense regret and anguish. In [John 3:19](#), the problem is that people "loved the darkness rather than the Light." Consequently, Jesus portrays hell as the ultimate destination for those who choose to remain in darkness, rejecting God's pardon and grace.

This separation from the source of all goodness, love, and life is a fate more harrowing than any mere physical fire. Hence, Jesus' teachings highlight not only judgment but the tragedy of rejecting God.

8. Hope and Deliverance

While Jesus' words on hell are sobering, they are inseparable from His message of hope. Passages like [John 3:16](#) proclaim God's love that offers eternal life. Jesus' resurrection—corroborated by multiple historical sources and attested to by transformed apostles—demonstrates God's power to rescue humanity from

death and judgment. His victory over the grave validates His warning about hell: if He can conquer death, then His cautions about the afterlife carry unshakable authority.

By frequently pairing judgment with an urgent call to repent and believe, Jesus holds out the promise of deliverance. Individuals can choose to avoid hell through sincere belief, trust in His atoning sacrifice, and acceptance of the grace He freely offers.

9. Conclusion

Jesus consistently teaches that hell is a real, eternal place of conscious separation from God. He portrays it as the just consequence for unrepentant sin and rebellion, while also warning of its permanence and offering a path of escape through repentance and faith. His use of vivid language—"unquenchable fire," "outer darkness," "weeping and gnashing of teeth"—underscores the gravity of this doctrine.

In His teachings, divine love and justice intersect. Hell is not portrayed as an arbitrary punishment; it flows naturally from the holiness and righteousness of the Creator. Yet Jesus' repeated invitation to turn away from sin and receive salvation reveals God's heart of compassion, beckoning humanity toward life, not condemnation.

This balance between warning and mercy defines the nature of hell in Jesus' words: it stands as a solemn truth that calls us to recognize our moral responsibility, repent of wrongdoing, and embrace the hope of redemption.

Is Hell real and eternal?

Introduction

The question of whether hell is real and eternal has been central to theological discussions for centuries. Scriptural passages, historical context, and extensive study across cultures converge on the concept of a place or state of separation from God's presence, described in terms of punishment, judgment, and final justice. Below is a comprehensive overview, drawing on biblical references and the weight of historical and scholarly research.

Definition and Terminology

“Hell” in the Bible is often associated with several terms, each highlighting different facets of judgment or the afterlife. In the Old Testament, “Sheol” sometimes refers to a general abode of the dead ([Psalm 9:17](#)) and can carry undertones of a place of darkness or the grave. In the New Testament, “Hades” is used similarly, though gradually connected more explicitly with punishment ([Luke 16:23](#)). Another term, “Gehenna,” refers to the “Valley of Hinnom” ([Matthew 5:22](#)), a location historically known for idolatrous sacrifices and, later, a burning refuse pile. This term accentuates the imagery of fiery judgment.

Throughout Scripture, these terms converge on the idea of judgment for those who stand against divine righteousness. The focus shifts beyond a mere physical location to the spiritual reality of eternal separation from God.

Historical and Cultural Context

The cultural background of ancient Israel, along with intertestamental Jewish literature, shows beliefs in final retribution for the wicked. Second Temple Jewish writings (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the Qumran caves) allude to punishment in the afterlife, confirming a long-held understanding of divine justice. Archaeological finds that support the authenticity of these texts

help establish that the biblical authors consistently treated hell as real. The reliability of the Old and New Testament manuscripts, affirmed by numerous papyrus fragments and codices (such as Codex Sinaiticus), points to a consistent transmission of these warnings of coming judgment.

Within the Greco-Roman context of the New Testament, references to Hades also resonate with the broader cultural idea of an underworld. Yet the New Testament writers uniquely emphasize an eternal judgment orchestrated by the Creator. This alignment between historical understanding and dedicated scriptural clarity allows for a strong foundation to the question of hell's reality and duration.

Scriptural Foundation: Hell's Reality

Biblical teaching presents a cohesive perspective that hell is a genuine reality:

1. Old Testament Previews

- [Daniel 12:2](#): “And many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake-some to everlasting life, but others to shame and everlasting contempt.”

This passage anticipates a resurrection of both righteous and wicked, with clearly different destinies.

- [Psalm 9:17](#): “The wicked will return to Sheol- all the nations who forget God.”

While Sheol can refer broadly to the realm of the dead, this verse illustrates an alignment with divine justice affecting those in rebellion.

2. New Testament Teachings

- [Matthew 25:46](#): “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Jesus contrasts eternal life with eternal punishment, making the duration for both parallel-one lasting forever in the presence of God, and the other likewise unending.

- [Mark 9:43-44](#): “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go into hell, into the unquenchable fire.”

This vivid description points to the seriousness of the afterlife judgment, highlighting the unquenchable nature of the flame.

- [Revelation 20:10](#): “And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

This apocalyptic vision underscores the eternal dimension of divine judgment, noting “forever and ever.”

Nature of Hell: Eternal Separation and Just Judgment

Scripture consistently presents a moral universe created by a just and holy God. The ultimate expression of divine justice includes not only the reward of the righteous but also the punishment of the unrepentant. The depiction of fire, darkness, and separation from God is a dire warning aimed at highlighting the seriousness of a person’s eternal destiny.

- **Separation:** [2 Thessalonians 1:9](#) describes the consequence of rejecting God as “eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might.”

- **Eternal Duration:** The same Greek words used to describe the eternity of God ([Romans 16:26](#)) and eternal life ([John 3:16](#)) also describe the duration of judgment ([Matthew 25:46](#)). This linguistic consistency indicates that the punishment is without end.
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Consistency with a Loving and Just God

A common objection questions how a loving God could send people to eternal punishment. Yet in the biblical narrative, God persistently provides

opportunities and warnings for humanity to turn from wrongdoing ([2 Peter 3:9](#)). Love does not negate justice; rather, love upholds righteousness and offers a path to reconciliation. When individuals choose persistent rebellion, Scripture indicates they face the consequence of separation from the source of life and goodness.

Furthermore, the reality of redemption through Christ is presented as the gracious alternative to judgment ([John 3:17-18](#)). The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, documented by eyewitness testimonies and historically affirmed by the earliest available manuscripts ([1 Corinthians 15:3-8](#)), allow a way of escape from condemnation. The consistent message is that God's desire is to save rather than to condemn ([Ezekiel 18:23](#)).

Historicity and Reliability of Scriptural Teaching

Archaeological excavations and textual analysis offer support for the consistency of the biblical text across millennia. Discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls (which date back as far as the third century BC) demonstrate remarkable fidelity in the preservation of Old Testament passages, including statements about divine judgment. Early church writings and quotations of New Testament passages in ancient sermons and letters affirm the early Christian conviction of a literal and eternal hell.

These historical validations reinforce trust that the biblical authors intended to teach a real hell. The fact that various manuscripts from different regions and times align on critical teachings further cements the message's authenticity. Such corroboration offers confidence that modern readers are receiving substantially the same text originally penned by the apostles and prophets.

Implications and Contemporary Reflections

1. Moral Responsibility

If hell is both real and eternal, then moral decisions carry an infinite weight. Actions, attitudes, and beliefs in this life are not inconsequential. There is an urgent call to align with the good, to turn away from evil, and to embrace the salvation offered through Christ ([John 14:6](#)).

2. Hope in Redemption

The consistent biblical theme is that no one must be condemned to eternal punishment. The resurrection of Christ ([1 Corinthians 15:20](#)) is presented as a historical fact, demonstrating both the reality of life after death and the authenticity of God's redemptive promise. Eyewitness accounts recorded in Scripture, tested through historical investigation, point to this event as a cornerstone of hope.

3. Evangelistic Motivation

The reality of a future judgment often serves as a catalyst for sharing faith. Early church history shows believers actively persuading others ([2 Corinthians 5:11](#)) to embrace forgiveness and eternal life. Modern-day accounts continue this pattern, with personal testimonies and contemporary miracles reinforcing the immediacy of the message.

Answering Key Objections

- **“Eternal punishment is unjust”**

The concept of an all-knowing God ensures that punishment perfectly matches the nature of the offense. God's holiness-ininitely good-establishes sin as infinitely serious, leading to a proportional penalty.

- **“The Bible's teaching on hell is uncompassionate”**

Scripture portrays God's constant invitations to repentance. Passionate calls such as in the prophets ([Isaiah 1:18](#)) and the ongoing theme of God's longsuffering ([Romans 2:4](#)) highlight divine compassion. Hell is presented not

as God's desire, but as a necessary aspect of upholding justice and respecting human choice.

- **“Hell is simply figurative”**

While imagery in Scripture can be symbolic, it points to a concrete reality—eternal separation from the source of life. Even if certain descriptive elements are metaphorical, they serve to emphasize the severity and permanence of the eventual judgment.

Conclusion

Combining biblical teaching, manuscript reliability, and historical context yields a unified testimony that hell is indeed real and eternal. From Old Testament prophets to the explicit words of Jesus and the authors of the New Testament, the consistent message is that rejecting the divine offer of salvation carries the ultimate consequence of unending separation from God.

Yet, in this sobering truth lies also an invitation. The same Scriptures that warn of eternal punishment proclaim the profoundly good news of redemption through Christ's work on the cross—offering everyone a decisive path away from condemnation. Therefore, the biblical witness underscores that hell is real and eternal, but also that hope, forgiveness, and life everlasting are fully accessible through a personal, saving relationship with the risen Christ.

Hell

HELL (γέεννα, G1147). The Eng. word “hell” is from a Teutonic root meaning “to hide” or “to cover.” The Biblical word “Gehenna” refers to the valley of Hinnom, which was the Wadi er-rababi, just SW of Jerusalem. This valley was the location of the notorious sacrificial offering by fire of children to the god Molech by Ahaz ([2 Chron 28:3](#)) and by Manasseh ([33:6](#)). Josiah’s reforms included desecrating the high place of Topheth located in the valley to prevent the continuation of such sacrifices ([2 Kings 23:10](#)). According to Jeremiah, however, this practice continued, and therefore, he said the name of the valley would be changed to valley of Slaughter ([Jer 7:32](#); [19:6](#)) because it would become a place of death and burial for multitudes of people. The apocalyptic Book of Enoch states that there would be an abyss filled with fire S of Jerusalem into which ungodly Israelites would be thrown. Later the idea was extended so that this place was conceived to be the place of fiery punishment for all of the ungodly. Still later, when the place of punishment was conceived of as under the earth, although the original geographic location was shifted, the idea of fiery torment was maintained.

In the KJV, the word hell is used thirty-one times in the OT; in each case it is a tr. of Sheol, which was the place where both the ungodly and the godly were to go at death (see [Sheol](#)). Ten times in the NT, hell is a tr. of Hades, which is the NT counterpart of Sheol, the place where all of the dead dwell (see [Hades](#)). On eleven other occasions, however, it is used to tr. Gehenna, which refers to the place of the punishment of the ungodly, and therefore to “hell” as the term is used today. Hell also is used once in the KJV and RSVmg. to tr. Tartarus ([2 Pet 2:4](#)). In most instances in the RSV, the terms Sheol and Hades are retained, whereas Gehenna is tr. as “hell.”

1. Intertestamental views. The teaching that there is a place where the ungodly are punished forever is scarcely mentioned in the OT. In the intertestamental period, however, this idea became prominent, although its acceptance by the rabbis was far from unanimous. In the Second Book of Esdras, accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church but not by

Protestants, the subject is discussed. In 2 Esdras 7:75, Ezra asks if the lost soul will be tortured immediately at death or not until the renewal of the creation, to which God answers:

as the spirit leaves the body...if it is one of those who have shown scorn and have not kept the way of the Most High...such spirit shall...wander about in torment, ever grieving and sad...they will consider the torment laid up for themselves in the last days (2 Esdras 7:78ff.).

In the Ap. Lit. of this period, the term “Gehenna” is used to describe the compartment for punishment. The pseudepigraphical Enoch gives detailed descriptions of this place of punishment. The Pharisees accepted this view. Josephus states that the Pharisees believe that “the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment” (Jos. War II. viii. 14). Elsewhere he describes the position of the Pharisees by saying that the wicked “are to be detained in an everlasting prison.” In the time just prior to the NT period, the rabbinical school of Shammai divided all men into three groups: the righteous, the wicked who are “immediately written and sealed to Gehenna,” and a third group of people who “go down to Gehinnom and moan and come up again.” The school of Hillel thought that the ungodly were punished in Gehenna for a year and then annihilated, although certain esp. wicked men “go down to Gehinnom and are punished there to ages of ages.”

2. Teachings of Jesus. It should be noted that in the NT, Gehenna is used only in the synoptics except for an occurrence in James ([3:6](#)), and that in these synoptic references the word was used only by Jesus Christ. In other words, the knowledge of hell comes almost exclusively from the teachings of Christ, who spoke emphatically on the subject on a number of occasions.

(a) Jesus states that “whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.” In the context Jesus is saying that whereas the OT simply condemned murder, He has a higher demand and the result is that expressions of anger toward one’s brother can lead to the most severe punishment ([Matt 5:22](#)).

(b) Jesus says that the punishment of hell is so severe that it would be better for a person to lose an eye or a hand rather than that these members of the body should be instruments of sins that would lead to hell. Twice he speaks about the whole body being thrown into hell ([Matt 5:29, 30](#)).

(c) Although the word “Gehenna” itself is not used, Jesus is obviously speaking of the punishment of hell when He says that the tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and “thrown into the fire” ([Matt 7:19](#)). It is noteworthy that all of the above references come from the Sermon on the Mount.

(d) Part of the punishment pronounced upon the ungodly will be that they will be cast out from the presence of Christ ([Matt 7:23](#)).

(e) The ultimate punishment resulting from apostasy will include being consigned to “the outer darkness” that will produce a reaction of extreme anguish on the part of those who suffer this punishment. “There men will weep and gnash their teeth” ([Matt 8:12](#)).

(f) Jesus states that God has the power to “destroy both soul and body in hell” ([Matt 10:28](#)).

(g) At the conclusion of the Parable of the Tares, Jesus says that at the end of the world, sinners will be cast into “the furnace of fire,” which will produce anguish described in the same words as those of [Matthew 8:12](#). In the Parable of the Net ([13:49, 50](#)), the same punishment and the same reaction are again predicted.

(h) The ultimate punishment inflicted upon sinners is described by Jesus as being much worse than death itself, for it would be better to be drowned than to be punished for causing a child to be led astray ([Matt 18:6](#)). In the parallel Markan passage, Jesus then adds that it would be better to lose a limb that was the source of sinfulness than to “go to hell, to the unquenchable fire” ([Mark 9:42, 43](#)). Hell is further described as the place “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” ([9:48](#)). Here Jesus is using the terminology of [Isaiah 66:24](#). In the parallel passage in Matthew ([18:8, 9](#)), the threat is that of being thrown into “the eternal fire” or the “hell of fire.”

(i) In the Parable of the Wedding Feast, the punishment is again described as that of being cast into “outer darkness” with resulting anguish of weeping and gnashing of teeth ([Matt 22:13](#)).

(j) Jesus condemns the Pharisees for making their converts “twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” ([Matt 23:15](#)). A little later he warns that they will not be able to escape “being sentenced to hell” ([v. 33](#)).

(k) In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus again uses the phrases “outer darkness” and “weep and gnash their teeth” ([Matt 25:30](#)). In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus says to those whom He condemns, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” ([25:41](#)). Later in the same parable, Jesus describes their fate as “eternal punishment” ([v. 46](#)).

In several passages, Jesus implies that there will be degrees of punishment in hell. He speaks of hypocrites as those who will “receive the greater condemnation” ([Mark 12:40](#)), and Jesus speaks of some who will receive “a severe beating,” whereas others who have a lesser knowledge of the master’s will, receive “a light beating” ([Luke 12:47, 48](#)).

The certain conclusion from all of these passages is that Jesus taught the doctrine of hell clearly and emphatically. All but those who interpret Scripture with the most extreme literalism agree that this is figurative language used to describe hell, but the figures stand for the most terrible reality.

3. Writings of the apostles. Although the word “hell” (Gehenna) was not used in the NT outside the synoptics (with the exception of [James 3:6](#)), the idea of severe punishment in the world to come is taught in several passages. For example:

(a) Paul speaks of the impending judgment of God, which will result in eternal life for those who do good, “wrath and fury” for those who do wickedness. For the evildoer, “there will be tribulation and distress” ([Rom 2:3-9](#)).

(b) Appearance before the judgment seat of Christ will result in receiving “good or evil” depending on the actions during this life ([2 Cor 5:10](#)). Paul sees the danger of this terrible fate as an impelling force in his ministry ([v. 11](#)).

(c) At the return of Christ, those dwelling in complacency will experience “sudden destruction...and there will be no escape” ([1 Thess 5:3](#)).

(d) The fate of the ungodly at the Second Coming of Christ will be administered by the angels accompanying Christ who will come “in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord” ([2 Thess 1:6-9](#)).

(e) The author of Hebrews speaks of “eternal judgment” as a fundamental of the faith ([Heb 6:1, 2](#)) and of the threat of punishment in these terms, “a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries” ([10:27](#)). He speaks of this as “much worse punishment” ([v. 29](#)) than the death that was administered to those who broke the law of Moses.

(f) James ([3:6](#)) speaks of the tongue as “set on fire by hell (Gehenna).”

(g) Second Peter deals with the subject ([2 Pet 2:4-9](#)), that tells of the angels who sinned being cast “into hell (Tartarus),” which is described as “pits of nether gloom.” Later in the passage, God is described as knowing how “to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.” The ungodly who revel in sin will “be destroyed in the same destruction” ([v. 12](#)). “For them the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved” ([v. 17](#)).

(h) In the similar passage in Jude, it is revealed that the fallen angels “have been kept by him [God] in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day” ([v. 6](#)). The inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah “serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” ([v. 7](#)).

(i) The Revelation of John says, “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest” ([Rev 14:11](#)); “their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” ([21:8](#)).

These scriptural references demonstrate that the apostles followed Christ in teaching that life issues in two possible destinies, eternal blessedness or the torment of hell. The NT writers are very reserved in their descriptions of hell, esp. in comparison to the contemporary noncanonical Ap. Lit., but they are

clear in teaching a judgment issuing in eternal punishment. (See [Everlasting Punishment](#) for a discussion of the claims that the Bible teaches annihilation or universalism.)

4. The Early Church. In the period immediately after NT days, the doctrine of hell was clearly taught. Many of the martyrs of that period, considering hell to be the fate of those who denied the faith, were given courage to face martyrdom by the conviction that this was the easier of the two alternatives.

In the 2nd cent., the Church Fathers give evidence in their writings of their convictions on the subject. For example, Ignatius (died a.d. 117), commenting on a passage in Ephesians says, “one so defiled will go into unquenchable fire.” The Shepherd of Hermas (c. 115) speaks of “those which fell into the fire and were burned are those who have departed for ever from the living God.” The Epistle of Barnabas (c. 120) mentions “the way of eternal death with punishment.”

Justin Martyr (c. 110-165) in his *Apology* says, “we are fully convinced that each will suffer punishment by eternal fire, according to the demerit of his actions.” Irenaeus (a.d. 135-200) uses the term “eternal fire” repeatedly. Tertullian (c. 160-220) mentions “the greatness of the punishment which continueth, not for a long time, but forever.” He is the first of the Fathers who expresses joy at the spectacle of the lost in hell, an attitude not found in the Bible, but one that became common in the Middle Ages. The early Fathers gave unanimous testimony in favor of the belief in hell. It was not until Origen (c. 185-254), who held a number of other un-Biblical views as well, that a major church teacher denied this doctrine.

In conclusion, the doctrine of hell is a thoroughly Biblical doctrine. Therefore it is not surprising that in the history of theology, a denial of this doctrine has often accompanied weak views of Biblical inspiration. The reaction against this doctrine has, however, been partly the fault of some of its adherents who have proclaimed it in crudely literalistic terms. Thoroughgoing conservatives such as Calvin, Hodge, Strong, and Schilder have recognized the symbolic nature of the Biblical terms “worm,” “fire,” etc. Another cause of reaction against the

doctrine has been the exultant glee or other unloving attitudes held by some who have proclaimed it, but this is not a part of the Biblical doctrine. The Bible does not give the physical location of hell or anything about its furnishings, but it assures readers that those whose sins are not atoned for by Jesus Christ will receive perfect justice from God, that they will receive exactly what they deserve for all eternity, which will be a most miserable fate. This ought to be one of the impelling motives making evangelism the urgent business of all Christians.

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What is annihilationism?

Definition and Overview

Annihilationism is the teaching that the final fate of the unrepentant or wicked is complete destruction rather than unending conscious suffering. According to this view, those who reject salvation cease to exist after judgment instead of undergoing eternal separation from God in a literal, conscious state of torment.

In many discussions, annihilationism is paired with the concept of “conditional immortality,” the idea that only those who receive salvation in Christ are granted an immortal existence, while all others are ultimately destroyed. This teaching raises significant questions about the nature of the human soul, the duration of punishment, and how key passages in Scripture address humanity’s eternal destiny.

Key Scriptural Passages

One of the most commonly cited verses for annihilationism is [Matthew 10:28](#), where Jesus states, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Instead, fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Proponents argue that the term “destroy” implies total eradication. Another frequently mentioned verse is [John 3:16](#): “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Advocates of annihilationism emphasize “perish” to suggest that those who do not believe will be destroyed entirely.

However, there are numerous other passages that appear to support an ongoing conscious existence beyond the resurrection. For example, [Matthew 25:46](#) says, “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same Greek term (aiōnios) for “eternal” appears in reference to both punishment and life, suggesting that both endure perpetually. [Revelation 14:11](#) likewise states, “And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. Day and night there is no rest for those who worship the beast and its image,” indicating unending judgment.

Additionally, [Mark 9:48](#) cites [Isaiah 66:24](#), describing a place “where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.” Such language has historically been interpreted as indicative of unending conscious suffering for the impenitent.

Historical and Theological Context

Annihilationism is not a recent phenomenon. It has been proposed or considered by certain early Christian writers, though historical consensus has more often upheld the view of unending conscious punishment. Early church fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna referenced eternal punishment in their writings, often relying on teachings they attributed directly to the apostles.

By the medieval period, the majority understanding within Christendom affirmed the immortality of the soul and the eternal nature of both salvation and judgment. The Reformation reaffirmed Scripture’s authority on such doctrines, with many reformers strongly maintaining the unceasing nature of hell. Yet, some minority groups in different eras have continued to advocate for annihilationism or conditional immortality.

Textual scholars have noted that earliest manuscript evidence (including key codices such as Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) remains consistent in relaying passages on judgment. There is no significant textual variance that would remove the eternal descriptor from punishment. This uniform manuscript witness bolsters traditional interpretations of eternal punishment.

Arguments Advanced by Annihilationists

1. Scriptural Language of ‘Destruction’: Passages such as [Matthew 10:28](#) and [2 Thessalonians 1:9](#) (BSB: “They will suffer the penalty of eternal destruction...”) are viewed to mean utter extinction. Proponents hold that “destruction” is final, not ongoing.

2. **Consistency with Divine Justice and Love:** Annihilationists argue that everlasting torment does not reflect the love and justice of God as revealed in Scripture. They see a harmony in the idea that the wicked and unrepentant simply cease to exist.

3. **Conditional Immortality:** Advocates maintain that immortality is a gift bestowed only upon believers. They cite passages such as [1 Timothy 6:16](#), which says God “alone is immortal,” to support the claim that humans must receive immortality through Him; otherwise, their life is temporary.

Counterarguments to Annihilationism

1. **Lexical Study of ‘Eternal’:** The same Greek term (aiōnios) describes both life and punishment in [Matthew 25:46](#). Counterarguments assert there is scholarly consensus that when this term is qualified by references to divine eschatological action, it indicates ongoing, unending duration.

2. **Biblical Themes of Unending Existence:** Passages such as [Revelation 14:11](#) and [Revelation 20:10](#) use vivid language suggesting a never-ending state of judgment. “The smoke of their torment rises forever and ever” is interpreted as an ongoing reality, rather than an ultimate cessation.

3. **Nature of the Human Soul:** Many hold that Scripture teaches humanity is created in the image of God ([Genesis 1:27](#)) and that this includes a soul meant for an eternal relationship—either in fellowship or separation. The “second death” ([Revelation 20:14](#)) is understood to be a permanent existential state away from God, not an obliteration.

4. **Early Church and Manuscript Evidence:** Historically, the broad testimony of the earliest followers of Christ supported the idea of eternal punishment, and there is no evidence in the primary manuscripts to suggest the text has been altered to arrive at the concept of eternal judgment.

Philosophical and Behavioral Considerations

From a philosophical standpoint, debates often center on the infinite nature of sin against an infinitely holy God. If humans are designed to exist eternally and sin remains unrepented, the consequence is seen as prolonged. On a behavioral level, this question impacts motivations for living ethically and evangelistically, as well as the believer's sense of responsibility toward proclaiming repentance and salvation.

In various anecdotal accounts, those who have grappled with near-death experiences sometimes testify to encounters with either divine or terrifying realities beyond physical life. While not forming a primary theological argument, such cases are sometimes cited to illustrate the possibility of continued existence and conscious awareness after death.

Archaeological and Historical Corroborations

Archaeological discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls (found at Qumran) show that certain Jewish sects prior to and during the time of Jesus held views about final judgment and punishment that included language akin to eternal condemnation. Moreover, Greek manuscripts from early Christian communities consistently translate key eschatological terms without ambiguity toward a cessation of existence. In other words, there is no significant variant reading that would remove notions of eternal consequence from the biblical text.

Furthermore, historical inscriptions and reports from the Roman world provide cultural context, revealing that eternal destiny—whether punishment or paradise—was a concept recognized within various philosophical and religious schools. These sources help illuminate first-century audiences' likely understandings of the terms used in Scripture.

Eschatological Implications

If annihilationism is true, one might conclude that the fearsome warnings in Scripture about hell essentially speak of a swift end to existence, which radically changes the traditional tension between God's justice and mercy. On the other hand, the predominant view of an ongoing hell sees it as a perpetual state of separation from God, underlining the magnitude of redemption through Christ.

Many see the death and resurrection of the Messiah as the definitive solution to an eternally grievous situation. "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me will live, even though he dies'" ([John 11:25](#)). Readers often conclude that this promise implies the eternality of life for believers, in contrast to the ongoing consequence for those who refuse it.

Conclusion

Annihilationism presents a perspective on ultimate punishment in which the unrepentant are said to be completely destroyed rather than experiencing an everlasting conscious judgment. While its proponents cite biblical texts emphasizing the word "destroy" or "perish," the broader scriptural and historical consensus has traditionally supported that punishment, like life, is eternal.

Studying the original language, textual transmission, early church history, and related passages reveals that the most commonly held interpretation has been that Scripture teaches ongoing conscious existence-either in glorious reunion with God or in separation from Him. Regardless of one's conclusion, the interwoven biblical theme remains that through the resurrection accomplished by the Son of God, humanity is offered redemption and unending fellowship with the Creator. As Paul writes, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" ([Romans 6:23](#)).

