

Eternally Punished?

Are Unbelievers Tormented Forever?

I would imagine most of you, like me, have had what I would call a “check” in my spirit when I consider that all unbelievers — those who are not “in Christ” and indwelt by the Holy Spirit of the eternal God — are destined for eternal torment and punishment. When questioned, most teachers and preachers I have sat under have generally taken the more conventional or traditional view that the lost will exist in some form of eternal misery, torment, and suffering. However, I have found in my study and research that there are many who have come to the conclusion, as I have, that it is far more likely that when the lost die, they will ultimately suffer destruction, ceasing to exist for all eternity.

To be candid, over the last several months I have read, studied, searched the scriptures, and seriously pondered this topic, only to find that the case for the traditional view of eternal torment has little on which to base its view, while the conditional view has an abundance of scripture that confirms its viewpoint. There are two additional views that have developed over the ages, which I will mention, but leave for others to defend.

• Four general views

I use here the short description of each of the most common beliefs as presented by John Walvoord, well known writer, professor, and head of Dallas Theological Seminary for many years. Incidentally, Walvoord personally has expressed his belief in what he calls the Orthodox View, or the more traditional view. The four views he describes are:

The Orthodox View — A righteous God demands absolute justice of the wicked [the lost]... a literal everlasting punishment.

The Metaphorical View — The wicked [the lost] will never be redeemed but their suffering and judgment are taken in a less-than-literal understanding.

The Purgatorial View — Requires that all must go through a period of punishment over periods of time, and ultimately many will be restored though others will be damned eternally.

The Conditional View — Judgment is temporary for the wicked [the lost] and conditional immortality or annihilation lessens the extent of their punishment and torment.

• Thoughts on the Traditional View — Walvoord

Walvoord, in his defense of the traditional view, includes the following statements:

“If the slightest sin is infinite in its significance, then it also demands infinite punishment as a divine judgment.

“While on the one hand he [God] bestows infinite grace on those who trust him, he must, on the other hand, inflict eternal punishment on those who spurn his grace.

“I would join with others who wish that the situation were otherwise and that some termination of suffering and some alleviation of the punishment might be discovered, but I cannot find it in the Bible.”

Walvoord also quotes the famous British preacher Charles Spurgeon as follows regarding the fate of the lost]: “...in fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all the veins as roads for the feet of Pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the Devil shall forever play his diabolical tune of hell’s unutterable lament.”

Statements like that from other preachers like Jonathan Edwards, who is noted for his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God!” are noted for their use of fear to bring many to Christ.

Two scriptures that are commonly used to confirm the traditional view:

Revelation 14:10-11 — **They will suffer the pain of fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. The smoke of their painful suffering goes up forever and always. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, and those who receive the mark of its name.”**

Matthew 25:46 — **And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life.**

Could eternal punishment mean that the punishment is in fact destruction — a destruction which will be for all eternity? Additional details on the eternal future of the lost is further noted under The Second Death section near the end of this paper.

• **All agree on eternal life for all believers**

Let me insert here that all sides of this issue seem to agree that we who believe have been blessed with the indwelling Spirit of God from the moment we believed — that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, buried and raised again to new life... not only as payment for our sins, but also that the Lord’s own resurrected eternal life is now passed to all who believe. And we will not perish, but will live forever — eternally, in God’s Kingdom — as his sons and daughters upon whom his favor rests.

As to the ultimate destination for believers, there are numerous passages to confirm that we, being indwelt by the very Spirit of the eternal God, carry his life through our time on this planet and into the eternal realm where we will exist forever and ever.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came so that they would have life, and have it abundantly... My sheep listen to My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”
John 10:10, 27-30

Not only are Jesus and the Father one, but Jesus reminded us that we who believe are now one with him. **You are united with the one who was raised from the dead so that we can bear fruit for God.** Romans 7:4

• **John 3:16 — A foundation**

I have selected what is likely the most well known and often used scripture verse to establish my foundation — that being John 3:16. To refresh your memory...

Everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. John 3:15-16. I back that up with another verse from the same passage of scripture, **Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever doesn’t believe in the Son won’t see life, but the angry judgment of God remains on them.”** John 3:36

Only the KJV uses the word everlasting for the believer. Everlasting is a reference to time and is limited to future. Most other versions use “eternal” which is outside of time... no beginning, no end. Thus when we receive Christ, we also have his life and like Paul we can say “**I was crucified with Christ**” since we are eternally a part of Christ’s eternal life — from his heavenly throne to his crucifixion to his glorification.

To maintain a degree of clarity I used the *New American Standard Version*, *King James Version*, *Common English Bible*, *Amplified*, and *New Living Translation* to seek translation comparisons. All five used the word **perish** and to further back up my point I gathered the definitions for the word from four sources as follows:

Merriam-Webster — to become destroyed or ruined : cease to exist

Cambridge Dictionary — to die or to be destroyed

Strong's Word Studies — permanent (absolute) destruction, i.e. to cancel out

Thayer's Greek Lexicon — to destroy, i.e. to abolish, put to an end

I have never heard a sermon preached on John 3:16 that included the permanent destruction of those who do not believe. Have you?

Among the words and phrases used in a common Thesaurus are: “*come to an end, be destroyed, cease to exist, disappear, vanish, evaporate, and pass into oblivion.*”

In my research I felt that one source laid out a clear and concise conclusion that expresses the view better than I can: *Bible Resources* cites the following in their view of the word perish:

“In the [John 3:16] text the word perish is translated from the Greek word, apollumi. The Strong’s definition is “to destroy fully... destroy, die, lose, mar, perish.” Hence we find that to perish would be a complete cessation of life. Death is the opposite of life. Many people entertain the idea, fostered for centuries by philosophers and theologians, that the dead do not die. In fact they imply that when a person dies they become “more alive” than before. But nowhere in the scriptures will we find that there is any consciousness in death.

“As for the fate of those who are unrepentant and disobedient – God states “...all souls are mine... the soul who sins shall die” Ezekiel 18:4. Romans 6:33, “The wages of sin is death.” (not eternal torment). Adam was told that the penalty of disobedience would be death (Genesis 2:17). Nothing is mentioned about having to suffer in eternal flames. If God can create, he also has the power to destroy. It would absolutely contradict God’s character of love, justice and mercy to assign living beings to a place of eternal torment.”

• **Thoughts on the Conditional View — Clark Pinnock**

Clark Pinnock is also a noted Christian theologian, apologist, and author who noted the following in his writings:

“One scarcely hears hell mentioned at all today, even from pulpits committed to the traditional view. This fact demonstrates that its defenders are not enthusiastic about it.

“Would God who tells us to love our enemies be intending to wreak vengeance on his enemies for all eternity? I take the position that their suffering will finally come to an end. I believe that unrepentant sinners perish, die the second death, and are finally destroyed.

“In the coming new order how can there still be two kingdoms, one belonging to God and the other to Satan, who reigns at least in hell? Surely God abolishes all of that in the new creation.

“The Bible uses the language of death and destruction, of ruin and perishing, when it speaks of the fate of the impenitent wicked. It uses the imagery of fire that consumes whatever is thrown into it; linking together images of fire and destruction suggests annihilation. Eternal punishment refers to a divine judgment whose results cannot be reversed rather than to the experience of endless torment.

- Additional Important Scriptures

Psalm 94:23 — He will repay them for their wickedness, completely destroy them because of their evil. Yes, the Lord our God will completely destroy them.

Psalm 37:9-10 — Because evildoers will be eliminated, but those who hope in the Lord — they will possess the land. In just a little while the wicked won't exist! If you go looking around their place, they won't be there.

Proverbs 12:7 — The wicked are destroyed and are no more, but the family of the righteous will endure.

Matthew 10:28 — Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but can't kill the soul. Instead, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell.

Romans 9:22-24 — In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction. He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory. And we are among those whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles.

The writer of Hebrews used words like “devour” and “destruction.” Hebrews 10:27 — There's only a scary expectation of judgment and of a burning fire that's going to devour God's opponents.

Hebrews 10:39 — But we are not like those who turn away from God to their own destruction. We are the faithful ones, whose souls will be saved.

Revelation 20:13-14 — The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and Death and the Grave gave up the dead that were in them, and people were judged by what they had done. Then Death and the Grave were thrown into the fiery lake. This, the fiery lake, is the second death.

Revelation 21:8 — But for the cowardly, the faithless, the vile, the murderers, those who commit sexual immorality, those who use drugs and cast spells, the idolaters and all liars—their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur. This is the second death.

2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 — He will give justice with blazing fire to those who don't recognize God and don't obey the good news of our Lord Jesus. They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction away from the Lord's presence and away from his mighty glory.

The apostle writes in 2 Peter 3:7 — But by the same word, heaven and earth are now held in reserve for fire, kept for the Judgment Day and destruction of ungodly people.

In my view of the many times “eternal life” is referred to in the New Testament, it is in reference to the “life” that God gives to believers. For example in John 17:1-3, Jesus, praying to the Father said, Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. If all of humanity is to live eternally, why would the Lord designate eternal life as specifically for believers? There are numerous other scriptures that would indicate the same question — Matthew 19:16, Mark 10:17, John 6:40, 10:10, 11:17, 17:2-3, 20:31 and lest we forget John 3:16 “whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” If all live eternally, why would nearly all of the New Testament indicate that eternal life is exclusive to born again believers who are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit — the life of Christ... who is eternal life?

• Final thoughts from others

Even the Westminister Confession seems confused, or at the least unsettled, on the issue... “The non-elect... shall be cast into eternal torments and be punished with everlasting destruction.” Hmmm... which is it, ‘torments’ or ‘destruction’? What is everlasting destruction? Annihilation!

Although some writers put C.S. Lewis on the side of the traditionalists, he did write in his book, *The Problem of Pain* — “Hell is the outer rim where being fades away into nonentity.”

E.G. Selwyn, Anglican priest and theologian wrote, “There is little in the New Testament to suggest a state of everlasting punishment, but much to indicate an ultimate destruction or dissolution of those who cannot enter into life.”

We do find mentions of hell being literal fire — yet it is also described as darkness, which begs the obvious question, aren’t fire and darkness clearly incompatible. Well, in Jude 7 and 13 we find... **Those cities [Sodom and Gomorrah] were destroyed by fire and serve as a warning of the eternal fire of God’s judgment. They [the lost] are like wandering stars, doomed forever to blackest darkness.** Could that mean destroyed by fire leaving them in total darkness? Or could it mean they are a “nonentity” as C.S. Lewis noted?

Or... is the torment of fire and burning not literal but as some believe, like Billy Graham’s reflection, that hell might be better understood as a terrible eternal burning within the hearts of the lost — a burning that can never be quenched?

The following first three quotes are taken from *The Lamplighter* magazine (2006).

“I believe the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment... I find the concept [of eternal, conscious torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.” — John Stott, All Souls Church, London.

“I maintain that the ultimate result of rejecting God is self-destruction, closure with God, and absolute death in body, soul, and spirit. I take the verse seriously that says: “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23)... Hell is not the beginning of a new immortal life in torment but the end of a life of rebellion. Hell is, as C. S. Lewis said, ‘the outer rim where being fades away into nonentity’... I contend that God does not grant immortality to the wicked to inflict endless pain upon them but will allow them finally to perish.... Our Lord spoke plainly of God’s judgment as the annihilation of the wicked when He warned about God’s ability to destroy body and soul in Hell (Matthew 10:28)... Thus the impression Jesus leaves us with is a strong one: The impenitent wicked can expect to be destroyed by the wrath of God. ... Everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for His enemies.” —Clark Pinnock, McMaster Divinity School.

Dr. David Regan notes: “To me personally, the most convincing of all arguments against the Traditionalist viewpoint relates to what Jesus Himself suffered on the Cross. Our sins were placed upon Him. He took the punishment we deserve. And what was that punishment? It was extreme suffering followed by death. If Jesus did not suffer the full penalty for our sins, then our debt has not been paid. But the Scriptures say that He paid the full debt, and it was not eternal torment, but death.”

From the website, hellhadesafterlife.com, I include the following:

“Why would God choose the words like “destroy, destruction, perish, death” to signify something other than their plain meaning?

- *Psalm 92:7 - 'Shall be **destroyed** forever.'*
- *Psalm 1:6- 'The way of the ungodly shall **perish**.'*
- *Matthew 10:28 - 'Rather fear him which is able to **destroy** both soul and body in hell.'*
- *John 3:16 - 'Whosoever believeth in him should not **perish**.' (Greek: destroyed)*
- *Romans 6:23 - 'For the wages of sin is **death**.'*
- *James 4:12 - 'There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to **destroy**.'*
- *Philippians 3:19 - 'Whose end is **destruction**.'*
- *2 Thessalonians 1:9 - 'Who shall be punished with everlasting **destruction**.'*
- *Revelation 20:14 - 'This is the second **death**'*

Is God trying to intentionally deceive us by using words that have a different meaning than what their plain meaning is? Isn't this a basic rule of hermeneutics? The literal meaning is the first meaning used unless context declares otherwise. Don't you have to redefine every single one of these words in order to get eternal torment as the final fate of the unsaved?"

"My mind fails to conceive a grosser misinterpretation of language then when the five or six strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses, signifying "destroy," or "destruction," are explained to mean maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence. To translate black as white is nothing to this." — R. F. Weymouth

"The present definitions of words must be destroyed and new definitions given. The new definitions end up being the opposite of the old definition, death is no longer death; it is eternal life in Hell. No other book in the world uses these words this way. Did God use words in a way that would be a deliberate misleading of mankind? They are not used with these meanings in our everyday language. When we say anything, a plant, animal or person is dead, we do not mean that plant, animal or person is alive and being tormented." — William West

"Allow me to add that if Christ supposedly preached eternal torture, as many contend, then Paul would have certainly backed it up. Yet Paul taught no such thing because Jesus taught no such thing, not to mention the bible they taught from—the Old Testament—teaches no such thing." — Dirk Waren

*"According to Hebrews 10:26-27, notice clearly that, on judgment day, raging fire will utterly consume God's enemies, not sadistically torture them without end, **and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God**. The Greek word translated as "consume" here literally means "to eat" (Strong 33) and is translated as "devour" in the King James Version. We can soundly conclude that raging fire will literally devour God's enemies when they're cast into the lake of fire—consuming them wholly. "— hellhadesafterlife.com*

*Now, what do we do with Revelation 20:10? **And the devil who had deceived them was hurled into the lake of fire and burning brimstone (sulfur), where the beast (Antichrist) and false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever.** Clearly there are only three names who are ultimately thrown into the lake of fire — the devil himself, the Antichrist beast, and the false prophet who will be tormented forever. However, another passage from Revelation 14:9-11 does offer a serious confirmation that there will be some who will suffer along with the devil, the antichrist, and the false prophet. **Then a third angel followed them, shouting, "Anyone who worships the beast and his statue or who accepts his mark on the forehead or on the hand must drink the wine of God's anger. It has been poured full strength into God's cup of wrath. And they will be tormented with fire and burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. The smoke of their torment will rise forever and ever, and they will have no relief day or night, for they have worshiped the beast and his statue and have accepted the mark of his name."** It would appear that many*

who, during the Tribulation period, fall under the influence of the Antichrist, will worship him and the False Prophet in their efforts to deny God in their scramble to yield to the power of Satan's destructive deceptions. This could also be a reference to demonic spirits who have a free run on planet earth before Christ returns to establish his kingdom and the devil is released from the abyss for a final run before the new earth, new heavens, and Holy City come — where we will live forever.

• **A few final scriptures**

A few additional scriptures that would confirm the destruction of the wicked and lost.

The Bible denies the immortality of the soul or spirit apart from Christ. 1 Timothy 6:15-16 ...**He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion!** Clearly, believers have immortality only because we are one with God's Holy Spirit — joined in our spirit to the immortal God.

Matthew 7:13-14 **Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is narrow and the way is constricted that leads to life, and there are few who find it.**

Acts 3:22-23 **Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your countrymen; you shall listen to Him and obey everything He tells you. And it will be that every person that does not listen to and heed that Prophet will be utterly destroyed from among the people.'**

The vast majority of the more than 60 versions checked use the word destroyed, some utterly destroyed, or exterminated. A common replacement for destroyed is the term "cut off." The verb cut off is defined in Merriam-Webster to mean "bring to an untimely end."

Revelation 20:14-15 **Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. Hades will be cast into the Lake of Fire along with anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life.**

Matthew 10:28 **And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell...**

Psalm 92:6-7 **Ignorant people don't know — fools don't understand this: though the wicked spring up like grass, and all evildoers seem to blossom, they do so only to be destroyed forever.**

Jesus himself said — John 11:25-26 **I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.** Can we take from what Jesus said that even though we will die physically we will never die as spirit/soul beings? And can we also take from these verses that those who do not believe will die both physically and as spirit/soul beings. It seems clear that unbelievers, those who are not in Christ will die once, then the judgement, and then a second death — destruction!

• **The second death**

Scripture uses the phrase "the second death" four times — all in the book of Revelation (2:11, 20:6, 20:14, 21:8). It seems clear that our physical death is considered the first death, but the references to the second death would suggest a death that would include the soul and the human spirit that is already dead to God — something more than just the physical first death.

Revelation 21:8 ...for the cowardly, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and sexually immoral persons, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

Revelation 20:14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

Hades is the place where the wicked dead reside and are punished. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man experiences torment in Hades. This is the intermediate state, for the bodily resurrection and the final judgment are still future. Jesus' point is that Hades foreshadows the rich man's final judgment. Similarly, Lazarus rests at Abraham's side, connoting the joyous abode of the righteous dead (Luke 16:23)—Baker's Dictionary.

It is interesting how easily many who hold the traditional view basically skirt the meaning of the “second death” and Hades references. For example, Walvoord states: “*Those passages in Scripture that refer to the destruction of the wicked relate to their physical death, not to the cessation of their existence. The treatment on conditional immortality of the wicked, learned though it is, and supported by many famous scholars, simply ignores the passages which contradict its point of view. The Bible is very plain that the wicked continue living after physical death — as stated, for instance, in Hebrews 9:27-28: Just as man is destined to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people. The judgment is after death, not at death, which implies existence after the body dies.*”

Walvoord’s example shows how easily most who follow the traditional and other views are so careful to avoid “the second death” verses. Clearly, the second death is a reference to the fact that the wicked are punished in Hades for a time, but they are ultimately cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death... the reality that Jesus was referring to as quoted in Matthew 10:28 — **...fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.**

It seems more than direct to me that the Lake of Fire is where Death, Hades, and unbelievers receive their final judgment and complete destruction — all included in the second death.

• In Conclusion

“...the traditional belief that God makes the wicked suffer in an unending conscious torment in hell is unbiblical, is fostered by a hellenistic view of human nature, is detrimental to the character of God, is defended on essentially pragmatic grounds, and is being rejected by a growing number of biblically faithful, contemporary scholars. I believe that a better case can be made for understanding the nature of hell as termination — which is superior biblically, anthropologically, morally, judicially, and metaphysically. — Clark Pinnock