

# Hell

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(The following are just summary notes, not an in depth study.)

## Introduction

Some say it is not nice to teach on hell, yet Jesus taught more on hell than all the rest of the Bible combined. We could wish hell were not true, but we must not apologize for God's truth. Every fiber of my being could wish it were not true, but every fiber of my being tells me it is true if God has righteousness – and He does.

Every fiber of our being should seek Christ, the only deliverer from infinite punishment.

Most cults and all liberals deny hell, for they think of man as not so bad and God without justice.

Soul sleep (that one is unconscious, extinct, after death) and annihilationism almost always go together.

One of the issues regarding eternal punishment is what "death" means in Scripture. "Death" in Scripture usually means "separation," not annihilation. Physical death is the *separation* of the spirit from the body (James 2:26), and spiritual death is the *separation* of the soul from the favor of God (Eph. 2:1ff; Rev. 20:11-15; 21:8). "She who lives in pleasure is *dead* while she lives" (1 Tim. 5:6). How can there be a *second* death unless "death" does not mean annihilation? (Rev. 20:14).

Time never ceases to exist for creatures, for only God "inhabits eternity."

## I. History of the Doctrine

The early fathers taught the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of hell, meaning eternal punishment.<sup>1</sup> Most also held to degrees of punishment and that the fire was material, not just figurative.

The protestant reformers universally taught the everlasting punishment of the wicked as have all Reformed churches since then. Some Anabaptists taught restorationism and some Socinians<sup>2</sup> the annihilation of the wicked.

Treatises by Reformed theologians on hell are by William G. T. Shedd in his *Dogmatic Theology* and Jonathan Edwards in his writings. John H. Gerstner has written an able defense (*Repent or Perish*) against annihilationism, especially against Fudge's *The Fire That Consumes*. The last two centuries have seen a number of people espouse the errant teaching of annihilation. A popular preacher around the

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<sup>1</sup> Origen was an exception and Augustine stated that Scripture was uncertain how long hell would last. See L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, p. 267ff.

<sup>2</sup> Socinians were the forerunners to the Unitarians, denying the deity of Christ, the atonement, hell, and were basically liberal.

time of the Civil War, Henry Ward Beecher,<sup>3</sup> was going to debate Shedd on eternal punishment. When Beecher read an advanced copy of Shedd's defense, however, he wired: "Cancel engagement, Shedd is too much for me. I half believe in eternal punishment now myself. Get somebody else."<sup>4</sup>

In this century such heavy weights as Philip E. Hughes and others have adopted the annihilation view. Denying this doctrine, however, severely compromises evangelicalism, as we shall see.

## II. How the Non-Orthodox Argue Against Hell

1. The soul is tied to the body so that when it ceases, the soul ceases. In other words, the soul is not immortal. Fudge, for example, in *The Fire that Consumes* argues that it is Platonic to argue for the natural immortality of the soul. But this is a straw man, for the Bible does not teach the *natural* immortality of the soul but the *supernatural* immortality of the soul, for it is only in God that "we live, move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). There is no being but God who is "naturally" immortal (1 Tim. 6:13-16); all others depend on Him moment by moment for their existence. He is the only One who has life in Himself (John 1:4; 5:265).

2. They argue that to perish or be destroyed implies annihilation, but we shall see that this is not true nor did the early church fathers, who were close to the Apostles and knew Greek as their first language, understand the words in their contexts this way.

3. They argue that the opposite of life is death, assuming that death means cessation of existence, which is not the Bible's definition. In Scripture, "death" means separation.

4. They challenge that those whom the Lord raised from the dead while He was on earth must have been non-existent, or else the Lord took them from heaven only to die again and be subject to losing their salvation (Lazarus in John 11). But it is not certain that one loses his salvation, though we cannot go into that here. They did die again, but what may have been the special circumstances surrounding their deaths and resurrections, the Bible does not say. But if one is glorified at death as the Bible apparently teaches (1 John 3:1ff), how could the Lord bring one back to this sinful world, back to an earlier point of his sanctification, they argue? Part of the answer is that until the Lord's Ascension, most saints had not gone to heaven but were in sheol/hades. It was at His Ascension that "He led captivity captive," that the saints were glorified. Now after His Ascension, saints are not resurrected. Glorification is still in the future (1 John 3:1-2).

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<sup>3</sup> Beecher, according to Rushdoony, wanted the popularity of the people in New England, so he was a Calvinist, an Arminian, and then a Unitarian, depending on what the people wanted.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Gerstner's *Repent or Perish*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Some have misunderstood that since the Father granted to the Son to have life in Himself that this meant that there was a time the Son did not have such. However, since the Son is eternal, being "in the beginning with the Father" and was God, there was never a time when this was not so. We have eternal truths in human language.

5. They say that the traditionalists do not have an explanation of the body of those resurrected who are damned, which is not true and irrelevant. We believe that their bodies will not be glorified as the bodies of the righteous but nevertheless will be raised and joined with their souls in hell. The Bible does not describe such bodies as it does the elect, so we go no further. It is irrelevant because it has nothing to do with how long one stays in hell.

6. *Hades* and *sheol*, they maintain, only mean the grave, not some place after death where people are still conscious. This is emphatically not true, the words meaning either grave or hell, depending on context, and the *vast majority* of time they mean the place of departed spirits. The fathers almost universally understood *sheol/hades* as the place of departed spirits, not the grave.

### III. Particular Passages that Teach Eternal Punishment

1. Jesus taught more on hell than all the rest of the Bible combined.

2. In Matthew 11:21-22, the Lord taught degrees of torment: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be *more tolerable* for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you." If it will be "more tolerable," then their punishment will be less than others. Some will be beaten with many stripes and others with few (Luke 12:48). There can be no degrees of punishment if annihilationism is true, for there are no degrees of non-existence.

3. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). It is a sin to fear man and a sin not to fear God, but if God could do no more than man, namely, bring about extinction, what is the point of the Lord? Annihilationism teaches us not to fear God, for He terminates all suffering in annihilation.

4. Body and soul can be separately killed, thus indicating that the soul may not "die" with the body (Matt. 10:28). If man can kill the body and the soul cannot be separated from it, then Christ's statement has no meaning, for man can indeed kill the soul as well as the body, resulting in extinction. Furthermore, if the soul is destroyed "in hell," it would indicate that the soul survives after death.

5. Luke 16:19ff (read it!). Luke is so clear that it would take a theologian to weasel out of it. In this passage of Lazarus and the rich man, we have separation of body and soul (Lazarus died "and was carried by the angles to Abraham's bosom"), fire and punishment ("I am tormented in this flame"), thirst because of the heat ("send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue"), and no annihilation (Abraham and the rich man converse *after* death). We must observe several other things about the passage. First, some try to avoid the force of the passage by saying it is a parable. But the passage itself does not say it is a parable as Jesus often does with His other parables. Furthermore, Jesus never told a parable with a specific name (Lazarus) in it. "Abraham's bosom" was a common figure for being in God's favor, not something to excuse one to take a

whole passage as figurative. Finally, Jesus' parables were not weird fantasies but were true to life.

Some object by that this passage must be figurative since we would not expect the righteous (Abraham) and the wicked (rich man) to have contact after death as they do here. But God makes an exception here, as He did when He allowed Saul to call up Samuel from death. The contact they allegedly had after death was only some form of communication, not personal contact. Indeed, it is personal contact that the rich man wants from Lazarus, but Abraham says it is not possible. Furthermore, God can do what He pleases, and we must accept what He tells us, not make rules to "bind" Him with *we* think He can and cannot do.

Finally, the rich man wants Abraham to rise from the dead and go tell his five brothers about hell. But we see that what prevents one from going to hell is the Gospel as revealed in the Holy Scriptures ("They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them"), not miracles or even a resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

6. The fire is everlasting and the punishment forever:

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matt. 25:46).

If God punishes the impenitent, then it must be forever since the impenitent never repents. One must reap what he sows as long as he sows it, which is forever. In addition, why would the punishment be everlasting with no one to punish?

If the just have *eternal* life and rewards that go on forever, then the unjust must have the opposite, *eternal* punishment. Are we to think that *eternal* means never ending for the just but ending for the unjust when the same word is used only a few words apart? The annihilationists argue that the *effect* of their punishment goes on forever even though the persons cease. But then we could conclude the same for the just, that the *effect* of their rewards go on forever though they personally cease. Indeed, for one to have *eternal life* must mean they exist forever and to have *eternal punishment* must mean someone exists to be punished. The parallel is obviously that *some* (persons) are rewarded forever and *some* (persons) are punished forever.

The word for "punishment" (κολασις, *kolasis*) is rendered by the New World Translation (Jehovah's Witness Bible) as "cutting-off," but this has no support from Greek. In Classical Greek, in the Septuagint, in the New Testament and in the period of the New Testament the word strictly meant "punishment." Aristotle so used the word<sup>7</sup> and other classical authors; *kolasis* is always used of punishment.

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<sup>6</sup> This may be a sign of things to come, for Christ rises from the dead and the Jews still do not believe! The apparent remorse of the rich man in hades is only apparent, for he shows his contempt of God by hating His punishment and by demanding a miracle for his brothers. Jesus said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt. 12:39). The sign of Jonah was His resurrection.

<sup>7</sup> See Abbott-Smith, p. 252 for Aristotle; Liddell & Scott for Plato, *Intermediate Lexicon*, p. 441; Thayer has

During the time shortly after Matthew wrote his Gospel, one Greek said: “for the evil-doers among men receive their reward not among the living only, but also await *punishment* and much torment.”<sup>8</sup>

We may infer, as Jonathan Edwards did, that the misery of the damned is intensified over the millennia since they do not repent but only gnash out in rage against God, thereby increasing their culpability. Since they sin continually, they increase in punishment forever, thus arguing that they could not be annihilated. The more sin the more punishment, and the more punishment the more sin, and so on forever. In the words of Scripture, the impenitent remain wicked forever: “He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still; he who is holy, let him be holy still” (Rev. 22:11). One cannot remain filthy and wicked if he does not have existence, for non-existence has nothing. Annihilation is not punishment of a being but the extinction of a being. One cannot punish what does not exist.

Likewise, the enjoyment of the just is increased as they are enabled to enjoy God more and more over the millennia with never ending joy, ever increasing in their capacity to love Him as they gain in knowledge, worship, (etc) having already been made perfect in holiness.

In Revelation 14:11 we read: “And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.” If they are annihilated, they have rest forever, but John says they do not rest. What is the point of having smoke ascend forever if they are not being punished forever?

In Mark 9:43-44 we read:

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched – where “Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

The figure is from the south of Jerusalem, a valley from Ge-Hinnom (Greek *Gehenna*), which was a place of fire and worms, where garbage was burned, and became a metaphor called *Gehenna* to describe the real place of final abode for the wicked, hell. In the literal valley outside Jerusalem, the fire was nearly always burning with worms eating the garbage. One can surmise of that valley that sometimes the fire did go out and the worms died, but the point of the Lord is that in the final *Gehenna*, in His hell, neither is true. The punishment is both external, the fire, and internal, the worm, and neither will ever cease. The fire would seem to be literal (though some good, orthodox men have other views) and the worm is their shame and internal agony, which is total despair and hopelessness (Ps. 22:6; Isa. 41:14; 66:24; Jonah 4:7). Are we to think that their “worm” is never annihilated but

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a good discussion of the word, p. 353 as does BAG, p. 440, 2nd edition.

<sup>8</sup> Moulton & Milligan from the papyri, p. 352.

the person is?

The Lord stated that He will cast them into “a furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42), which cannot happen to those who are annihilated. Jesus’ hell causes weeping and gnashing of teeth without end but annihilationism eliminates this.

7. Paul taught the same as the Lord Jesus:

We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed (2 Thess. 1:3-10).

Some want to say that “destruction” means annihilation.<sup>9</sup> The idea, however, in the word “destruction” is ruin with annihilation virtually never being the meaning, though it can be in rare instances. Bible study is more than just lexical meanings, however, and the context here and elsewhere defines that the “destruction” goes on forever. Indeed, Hendriksen accurately translates “eternal destruction” here as “never-ending destruction.” In other words, the sinner is being destroyed in hell, but it takes forever to do so.

Often “destroy” does not mean annihilate at all. Did Paul mean that by eating food one can annihilate his brother (Rom. 14:15), or that at one time he had annihilated the faith (Gal. 1:23)?

Notice the context of the above passage confirms that “destruction” is never ending. God repays with “tribulation” or “affliction” those who trouble His people (v. 6). He does this when Jesus returns (v. 7), but if the wicked are annihilated, then they are not punished but exterminated, which is the ending of punishment.

Some object that they are destroyed “from the presence” of the Lord, which they understand to mean that if they no longer have His presence, they must be gone since God is everywhere, even in heaven and hell (Ps. 139:8). However, what

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<sup>9</sup> There are two primary Greek words for “destruction” that are used in the New Testament (*olethros*, *apōleia* both nouns; the verb is *apollumi*).

Paul surely means is not the absolute, metaphysical presence of the Lord but the favorable presence of the Lord. God is indeed in hell, which is precisely what makes it hell – enduring His personal and infinite wrath. In the Book of Revelation, the reason men are running and wanting the mountains to fall on them is that they fear the wrath of “Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16). “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). “Being shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power when people are extinct is no deprivation. Nothing can’t miss anything. It is sillier than saying that rocks are shut out. . . , for they, though they are also incapable of apprehending the presence of the Lord, at least do exist.”<sup>10</sup> As Jonathan Edwards has stated: “’Tis the almighty God that shall become the fire of the furnace.” “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29).

But notice also that what makes hell so awful is that one is in the immediate presence of God without grace, a wicked person in the presence of the infinitely holy Person, who will not tolerate sin. On earth now, there is at least common grace so that people do not suffer the pains of hell, no matter how bad it is. But in hell, all grace is removed and the wicked are confronted with the fierce wrath of the holy God who will despise them for all eternity for their rebellion. He will constantly pour out His unmitigated punishment on them forever.

Thus the idea of some that Satan is lord of hell and inflicts people there is not biblical. He is as much the subject of punishment as the rest, and the wrath of *God* burns against him as with the others. God is Lord of hell as He is everything else. Christ said that God would destroy the soul, not the devil.

#### **IV. Theological Implications of Denying Hell**

One cannot deny something this basic without there being tremendous consequences in other areas of the faith.

1. Soul sleep, the teaching that man’s soul lives and dies with his body, usually is part of annihilationism. If soul sleep were true, then we would have the following problems:

– The wicked would be recreated at the Last Day resurrection exactly as they died, as sinners, thus making God the creator of wickedness.

– At the Last Day, God would bring the wicked to life to tell them they would be immediately snuffed out forever, which would be totally senseless since they were already non-existent.

– Angels do not have a body like ours, and yet they are alive and suffer the pangs of hell forever. Why cannot God do such with wicked humans? Indeed, the Lord Himself stated that angels and humans suffer the same punishment (Matt. 25:41).

2. If the damned are not punished forever in hell, why should the righteous be rewarded forever in heaven? The two are tied together. If God’s justice requires

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<sup>10</sup> Gerstner, p. 89.

one, it requires the other.

3. It would not be just for someone like Hitler or Stalin to inflict horrible punishment on millions for *decades* only to receive the sentence of *instantaneous* annihilation, for then Stalin would have put many through *years* of suffering only to undergo no suffering himself. The only "hell" these people would experience would be in this world and of their own making. Someone may counter that it would not be just for one to receive punishment forever for crimes of only a few years, but we must remember that sin has infinite ramifications because God is infinite. All sin is primarily against God, not against man.

4. If soul sleep is true, the humanity of Christ, according to annihilationism, must have been annihilated when He died, which is what Fudge taught in *The Fire That Consumes*. This in turn would mean that the union of God with man had to occur *again* in His resurrection, like another incarnation, another Virgin Birth, if you will. This is dangerous theology, virtually bordering on rank heresy. Such would also seem to be a denial of the Creed that says "He descended into hell," meaning *hades* (maybe to lead the Old Testament saints to glory). The expression "He descended into hell" was used in the early Church to emphasize His true humanity, that He had a real human soul, contrary to those who maintained that His humanity was swallowed up into His deity.

5. If hell is not true, the work of Christ is dreadfully demeaned if not nullified, not believing in the infinite value of His death and of sin. Sin has infinite implications, requiring infinite satisfaction to God's infinite righteousness. Man could never satisfy this. God could satisfy such, but He could not shed blood. Thus Jesus had to be both God and Man: Man to keep the law perfectly, to die, and to be raised from the dead, descend into *hades*, and God to satisfy infinite righteousness. What man cannot do given an infinite amount of time, Jesus did in a moment of time since He was (is) infinite. Thus if the wicked are consumed in hell, sin is only finite and the death of Jesus is only finite. The rejection of Him would thereby only have the implication of few nano-seconds of punishment as the person is annihilated. But if sin has infinite requirements of punishment, then it takes infinite time to offer restitution to God for one's sins. The dilemma is this: If sin had infinite requirements, Jesus' death had infinite restitution; if sin is only a "misdemeanor," then Jesus need not be infinite or the payment infinite. Or to restate it: if man only suffers a brief moment, then sin is not so bad and only has finite consequences. According to this view, Christ's infinite deity would have played no role in the atonement.

In the traditional view sin is ethical, requiring the removal of sin's punishment and its pollution until the soul is made perfect in holiness. The resurrection of the body is the fruit of Jesus' atonement. In the heretical view, sin is metaphysical, resulting in the extinction of being, and redemption primarily brings about the recreation of a non-being at the Last Day. Is the person recreated in perfect holiness at this resurrection? This turns things on their heads.

6. It is to give the wicked rest from their sins to annihilate them, which is cer-

tainly easier than everlasting torment. Annihilationism teaches that extinction is worse than continual punishment, but the most they can say is that the momentary contemplation of annihilation is worse, for once annihilated, how can anyone make comparisons?

7. Annihilation is not a form of punishment but a substitution for it, for non-existent beings, by definition, cannot be punished, especially forever.

8. In summary, if hell is not forever, neither is heaven, the atonement is not infinite, the person and work of Christ is extremely distorted, justice is not meted out as some wicked caused other people to suffer for many years while they only suffer a second.

## V. Repentance and Hell

1. The sins of the reprobate are the fuel for the fire of their own judgment, the whetstone against which God's sharpens the sword of His wrath.

2. Those who undergo tragedies in this life may not have sinned more than others, for unless we repent we shall all perish (Luke 13:1-5). "The suffering of some is not a call to condemn them but to condemn all, especially ourselves."<sup>11</sup> "It is the goodness of God that leads to repentance" (Rom. 2:4).

3. "The only thing that will save women and men from the terror of the Lord is the cross of the Lord. But it is usually the terror of the Lord that first brings them to consider the cross of the Lord. If men do not fear the terror of the Lord, they must experience that terror. If you are not afraid of hell, you are almost certainly going there. You will then never doubt it again."<sup>12</sup>

## VI. Jonathan Edwards on Hell

Whatever some have imagined and pretended about promises made to natural men's earnest seeking and knocking, it is plain and manifest, that whatever pains a natural man takes in religion, whatever prayers he makes, till he believes in Christ, God is under no manner of obligation to keep him a moment from eternal destruction.

So that, thus it is that natural men are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire bent up in their own hearts is struggling to get out: and they have no interest in any

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<sup>11</sup> Gerstner, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Gerstner, p. 13.

Mediator, there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of; all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance of an incensed God.

The wrath of God is like great waters that are damned for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell last night; that you were allowed to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship.

It is an everlasting wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all. You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. (All the above from *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*).