

# HELL: Eternal Torment or Complete Annihilation?

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By Jeremy K. Moritz

## INTRODUCTION

I grew up in the church. For many years, I believed in the traditional view of Heaven and Hell—that souls are taken from the body immediately following death and are placed in either Heaven or Hell where they will spend eternity in bliss or unending torture. This is what most of the Christian church right now believes. For the last six or seven years, however, I have found countless scriptures that have changed my thinking considerably in this area. It seems to me that nearly the entire Bible teaches that eternal life is only experienced in Heaven, that Hell is a place of complete destruction and annihilation. There are many scripture passages that seem to clearly teach this, but there are others that admittedly seem to teach the traditional view as well. The Bible must never be thought to contradict itself, regardless of what simple meanings may be found in certain verses. When two positions seem to come at odds with one another, one must decide which view fits best in the *overall* interpretation of the Bible. Verses ought not to be taken by themselves but instead cross-checked against other scripture passages to decide what it is that the Lord is actually trying to teach us in His Word.

While some passages might seem to indicate one line of teaching and others seem to hint at a different one, there can be only one correct interpretation. Hell is either eternal or not—there is certainly no middle ground. After a great deal of research and reflection, I have come to believe very strongly in the unconventional doctrine of annihilation in Hell. The following is a study I have done to show why I feel that this is, in fact, the proper interpretation of the Word of God.

## SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR ANNIHILATION—

There are numerous scriptures that seem to clearly indicate that there is no eternal life for the wicked (not even in Hell). Here are quite a few that I found from the PC Study Bible after doing a search for the words "eternal life" in the concordance. These references are in Biblical order, and each is from the New American Standard Bible (Updated Edition) unless otherwise stated.

[Matt 19:16](#)—"*And someone came to Him and said, 'Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?'*"

This man spoke of *obtaining* eternal life. It wasn't as if he already possessed it. Preachers today would probably say to him "Son, you already have eternal life; it's just a matter of where you will spend it." But Jesus never said that.

[Matt 19:29-30](#)—"*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.*"

They will *inherit* eternal life. This indicates that not everyone has it already.

[Matt 25:46](#)—"*These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*"

This verse admittedly uses the phrase "eternal punishment," but it is juxtaposed against the phrase "eternal life." Death by annihilation in the Lake of Fire could certainly be called "eternal punishment" because it is eternal in its consequences. Death on earth is only temporal because everyone will be raised again at the resurrection. Death in the Lake of Fire, however, is eternal: there is no reversing it and no coming back from it. If Jesus meant for the punishment to last eternally, he probably wouldn't have contrasted it with the phrase "eternal life" which is clearly meant only for believers. If Jesus had intended what most churches believe he did with this verse, he should have said, "Both the righteous and the unrighteous will go away to eternal life, but the unrighteous will spend it being tortured while the righteous spend theirs in paradise."

[John 3:16](#)—"*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*"

This is the most quoted verse in the Bible and also one of the clearest accounts on the annihilation of the wicked. "...Whoever believes in Him shall not *perish*, but have *eternal life*." John didn't write that "...whoever believes in Him shall not *have everlasting life in torment*, but rather have *everlasting life in Heaven*." The way most churches interpret this, they mentally replace the very clear word "perish" with something that means nearly the opposite: "*never perish*."

[John 3:36](#)—"*He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*"

[John 4:14](#)—"*...but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.*"

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

Once again, the words "eternal life" and "life" are associated strictly with the righteous. The word "death" is reserved for the unrighteous, who will not go to Heaven. It takes a good bit of theological gymnastics to continually reinterpret these divinely inspired Words of God to mean the exact opposite of their natural meanings. Since when does "death" mean "eternal life away from God"? If John intended to say that, he should have used almost any other word instead of "death."

[John 6:40](#)—"*For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.*"

[John 6:47](#)—"*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.*"

[John 6:54](#)—"*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*"

[John 6:68](#)—"*and Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life.'*"

[John 10:28](#)—"*and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.*"

[Rom 5:21](#)—"*so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

[Rom 6:23](#)—"*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

This is another very popular verse which is quite clear in its teaching. "The wages of sin is *death* (not eternal life in torture), but the gift of God is *eternal life*..."

[Gal 6:8](#)—"*For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.*"

Once again, "eternal life" is from the Spirit and "corruption" is reaped from the flesh.

[Titus 3:7](#)—"*so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*"

[1 John 3:15](#)—"*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.*"

No murderer has eternal life abiding in him. Most Christians claim that *all* people, saved and unsaved, have eternal life abiding in them, but this is certainly not what the scriptures teach.

[1 John 5:11](#)—"*And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.*"

Eternal life is only in God's son. The unrighteous do not have the gift of eternal life.

All of the above scriptures were reached in a search for the words "eternal life" in the PC Study Bible. The search actually returned 42 occurrences of the phrase in the NASU version of the Bible. I did not incorporate every single verse because many were essentially repeats of verses I did include (for instance, some of the Gospels record virtually the same teachings of Jesus) and a few others were slightly less clear. However, in the entire Bible, there is *not a single verse* that records anything to the affect that "everyone has eternal life; it's only a matter of where each will spend it." Yet this is what most of the church today believes.

The same can be said of words like "immortality." This word appears five times in the Bible, and in each one, it is said only of God or of the righteous.

[Rom 2:6-7](#)—"*[God] will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life...*"

[1 Cor 15:53](#)—"*For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.*"

[1 Tim 6:15-16](#)—"*He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality...*"

Contrary, to popular opinion, the Bible never says that all people are born with an immortal soul. It says instead that only God has immortality, and He blesses whom He chooses with the gift of eternal life. The concept of the immortal soul is nowhere found in the Bible. According to Edward Fudge, William Robert West, and others, the belief is of pagan origin (accredited to many ancient teachers, especially Plato), and it worked itself into Christian theology by way of many of our "church forefathers," who knew more of the teachings of Plato than they did of the teachings of Christ and were only partly converted.

#### **ANNIHILATION IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY—**

Before I discuss the problems I perceive regarding the traditional doctrine of eternal Hell, I think it's necessary to show how the ultimate annihilation of unbelievers harmonizes with the rest of the doctrines of Christianity.

First of all, death has always been the penalty for wickedness. In the Old Testament, whenever people did what was evil in the Lord's sight, they received the punishment of instant death—not torture. Just as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire to punish their wrongdoing, so the Lord would be very consistent in His dealings to destroy on the Day of Judgment all those who have not repented.

Furthermore, Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty that we should have had to pay for our sins. The wages of sin is death ([Romans 6:23](#)), and because all have sinned ([Romans 3:23](#)), we all deserve that death. Now that Jesus died on the cross in our place, are we saved from physical death on earth? Of course not. Christians die all the time. What then are we saved from? We are rescued from the second death that takes place in the lake of fire ([Rev. 20:13-15](#)). This is a perfectly harmonious account of the message of the cross, and there is no serious flaw in it when examined with scripture.

If death is truly the penalty for sin, as the Apostle Paul claims it is, then by dying on the cross, Jesus actually suffered the same consequence that unrepentant sinners will bear. In this way, he truly "took our place" on the cross so that we would not have to face this consequence of our sins. If on the other hand the wages of sin is not death but eternal infliction of unbearable pain, then Jesus's temporary suffering did not even come close. Christians often emphasize the enormity of Jesus's anguish on the cross, but if traditional teaching on Hell is at all accurate, His

pain is not even an ounce of what most of the world is supposedly going to endure. If this is the case, He certainly did not take upon himself the penalty for our sin.

### **REVELATION 14:11—**

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

This verse creates some questions in my mind. At first glance, it seems to say exactly what most Christians believe: that the wicked will be tormented without end in Hell.

I've heard the well-known conditionalist author Dr. Edward Fudge's explanation of this verse. He claims that "smoke of their torment" implies complete and total destruction like smoke from the fire that consumed Sodom and Gomorrah. He also says that "they have no rest day or night" is indicative of the ceaseless nature that their punishment will take on for the time that they are punished (not necessarily forever). In other words, while they are being punished, they will not get intervals of rest like we all enjoy here on earth (even when you work all day, you still get to sleep at night). Instead, they will have no rest during this time, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it will last forever.

But there is another explanation that I find to be more convincing than that of Dr. Fudge. To understand this argument, we'll need get a little bit of context by looking at the two verses leading up to verse 11.

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone *worships the beast* and his image and *receives his mark* on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur *in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb*. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night *for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.*" ([Rev. 14:9-11](#), emphasis mine).

A Christian conditionalist named Scott McAliley read my article and pointed out to me that "to believe (as many do) that this is a figurative reference to everyone who failed to put their trust in God is to deny the plain language of Scripture that tells us that this is specifically a judgment on those who took the mark of the beast and worshipped him." Indeed, this detail is frequently overlooked by traditionalists and conditionalists alike.

Furthermore, the verses clearly state this will take place "in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb." If nothing else, this should be enough to prove that this penalty is not an unending, conscious, torturing one because observing such a punishment is not the way the angels or the Lamb (Jesus Christ) will choose to spend eternity. So the passage appears to say nothing of hell or eternity at all. Instead, it would indicate that those people who are still alive at Christ's second coming who have worshipped the Beast and received his mark will be tormented and destroyed, in the presence of Jesus and the angels, by burning sulfur raining down from Heaven.

Now, there will certainly be plenty of people who don't agree with this or Dr. Fudge's interpretation of [Revelation 14:11](#). Frankly, one would be hard-pressed to find a book of the Bible with more alternate interpretations than the book of Revelation. Some may insist that the verse seems to indicate the traditional view of Hell and appears to apply to all who die in their sins (not just those who take the mark of the Beast). Yet, does that immediately mean that the traditional view is correct? Does it mean that we should abandon the wealth of Biblical evidence for the annihilationist argument? Certainly not. The reason I say this is that the Bible must be taken on the whole. There are Christian cults all over the world who have come up with ridiculous, pagan beliefs, and every one of them draws support for their convictions from the Holy Scriptures. Like it or not, the Bible can be used to support some of the most unbiblical theology any of us can imagine. Scriptures must be cross-checked against the rest of the Bible for there to be some semblance of unity.

For instance, in [Matthew 5:29-30](#), Jesus himself says, "*If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you....If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you...*" If these verses are taken by themselves, they obviously have the plain meaning that we should be gouging out our own eyeballs and cutting off our hands. The reason why so few Christians accept this most natural interpretation is because it's absolutely outlandish and runs contrary to the rest of the Bible! We're made in the image of God ([Gen. 1:26](#)), and our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit ([1 Cor. 6:19](#))! It would be ludicrous to believe that our Heavenly Father truly intends for us to dismember ourselves when we sin. Even if no scriptures could be found to deny the plain meaning of [Matt 5:29-30](#), Christians would still disregard this interpretation on the basis of common sense and their knowledge of the character of God. And they would be right to do so.

So, I'm not about to claim that no support can be found for the eternal torture model of God's final judgment, but I would definitely say that it stands in fierce conflict with the rest of the Word, with common sense, and with the character of God.

Besides that, the middle of Revelation is perhaps the most bizarre set of chapters in the entire Bible. There is a massive amount of symbolism and a plethora of strange, indiscernible visions that work like scrambled pieces of a puzzle. I would contend that "proof texts" taken from Revelation (especially those middle chapters) should automatically be called into question for this reason. And one more thing: the very book out of which this scripture (14:11) comes also has one of the clearest illustrations of annihilation in Hell in the entire Bible. [Rev. 20:14-15](#) says, "*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.*"

## **THE CHARACTER OF GOD—**

Another major issue that must be addressed is on the character of the almighty God. Let us suppose for a moment that Hell is as the majority of Christian believers describe it—namely, a place of eternal torture. Hell is a place where those who have not prayed the prayer of salvation will be [or are currently being] tortured without end in the most unbelievably hideous way that

any person could possibly imagine: excruciating fire that inflicts pain but does not destroy. It must not be avoided that this is in fact some reflection of the character of God.

God is the creator of all things. No one but God has the power to create. Satan did not invent this place of torment; God did. It was God's design. God isn't sitting in Heaven with His hands tied wishing He had the power to change the system—it's *His own* system! Even those who try to claim that God did not create Hell still have to accept that it is fully within His power to destroy it. If God didn't create Hell, why does He allow most of His beloved creations to be tortured in it? It must be recognized that some of the culpability for Hell rests on God's shoulders. What does this say about Him?

Clark Pinnock, professor of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity College, defends the annihilation doctrine with the assertion that "this 'capital punishment' view of the final judgment at least does not involve a deity who is endlessly vindictive and a new creation where heaven and hell exist alongside each other forever.... The traditional understanding of hell is unspeakably horrible. How can one imagine for a moment that the God who gave his Son to die for sinners because of his great love for them would install a torture chamber somewhere in the new creation in order to subject those who reject him to everlasting pain?" (Clark Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing." *Christianity Today* v. 20. March, 1987, 40.)

I cannot think of a more devastating slander that could be associated with someone's name than the one that Christians have attributed to God. Just think of the worst, cruelest, most wretched human beings in earth's history: Attila the Hun, Benito Mussolini, Genghis Khan, Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, and others. More than likely, Adolf Hitler was the first name to come to mind. But even the ruthless Hitler had not the heart to do the kind of things that are being accredited to the name of God. Nothing that his victims experienced can even come close to the pains that must be present in the common Christian perception of Hell. What is a year's worth of hard labor compared with an eternity in burning flames? What is the murder of 16 million people when compared with billions being kept alive for no other purpose than to ceaselessly extract every ounce of pain from them for trillions upon trillions of agonizing years with no hope of ever escaping? If Hell is really as bad as this, then God has designed a system of judgment that involves far more horrendous practices than even the wickedest of men would ever dream of. What can be said about a God who would create such a place? Is this the God that we are supposed to share with others in what we call the "Good News"?

### **HAS ANYONE CHOSEN HELL?—**

Christians often make statements to the effect that everyone makes a choice as to where they will spend eternity. If anyone thinks they have not made a choice one way or the other, they have in fact made their choice to spend eternity in Hell. To put it another way, this is the "default choice"—if no decision has been made to follow Christ, one will spend untold zillions of years being burned, but never consumed, by fire.

There is more than one serious problem with this idea. First of all, as everyone knows, no one in the history of the world has ever seen both options, carefully weighed out the pros and cons, and willingly chose to spend an eternity in conscious pain and torment. That would be absurd. Even

in the case of those who say they would rather go to Hell—a very small minority of course—it is quite clear that they do not believe it to be what the traditional doctrine teaches. So while people have very clearly chosen to live for Jesus and receive eternal life as a reward, no one has ever chosen endless pain and suffering on purpose.

In some cases, people live their whole lives in selfishness, without any regard for the teachings of the Bible. It would be unscriptural to say that these people will spend eternity in paradise with Jesus, but does that mean that they have actually made the choice to go to Hell? Of course not. Many of them lived their lives sincerely believing that Heaven and Hell did not exist. In this case, they are not being punished eternally for the specific choice they made; they are instead being tortured forever for their ignorance. Can any one person's unawareness really merit a sentence of such severity?

Furthermore, no one has ever chosen to be born. If this game of life, as traditionalists teach it, were understood by everyone, most would choose not to play. I would love to spend eternity in Heaven, but if there was even a small chance that I would end up in a pit of fire and burn forever without rest, I would rather not risk it. The alternative is just too horrible.

We did not buy a lottery ticket hoping to make it into Heaven. Everyone is placed on this earth and is not given clear instructions as to what he/she is supposed to do. Thankfully, many have figured out the most important things, but most have not. For those who don't ever turn to Jesus for salvation, they deserve the merciful death of being consumed in the Lake of Fire. God was gracious enough to give them a temporary life on earth that they didn't deserve, but in the end that life will be taken away. But since no one can decide whether or not to take a chance and be born, it would be ludicrous to say that they have actually chosen countless years of torment—they were merely ignorant of the truth.

### **ROMANS 9:14-24—**

This next scripture passage deals with a subject that many shudder to mention: predestination. Christians have often raised questions as to whether or not this is proper biblical theology, and much of the church is divided on this issue. I believe it relates strongly to the subject of Hell as I will explain further in this section. Here is the passage:

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.' So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?' On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience

vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory ([Rom. 9:14-24](#)).

In reading passages of scripture such as this, it becomes quite evident that the Apostle Paul did not believe in Hell in the same way that most Christians today think of it. Assuming Hell is a place where the soul is ultimately annihilated and swept from existence, these verses make complete sense. If God created someone, He is not obligated to give that person eternal life in His presence. He is the creator and is certainly entitled to bestow love and mercy on His creation or to destroy it if He so chooses.

Most Americans feel the same way of cattle ranchers. If a farmer cultivates a breeding ground for animals (cows, for instance), then those animals are born only because the farmer has made allowance for them. Without the farmer, many cows would have never come into existence in the first place. If the farmer, after years of receiving milk from one his cows, would like to then mercifully put the animal to sleep and take the meat from it, he is entitled to do this. If, on the other hand, the farmer feels that his giving the cow life entitles him to torture the poor animal every waking moment of his pitiful existence, that farmer is regarded as a cruel, sadistic, inhumane man, and his practices are abhorred by any self-respecting person.

If Paul understood Hell to be a place of unending, conscious pain and agonizing torture, [Romans 9:14-24](#) would be cause for outrage. How could anyone call a God loving who would feel justified in creating people for the sole purpose of "demonstrat[ing] His wrath and [making] His power known" and ultimately allowing these people to suffer eternal torment in fire? If this passage is pondered objectively, I believe it makes far more sense to say that God intends for the wicked to perish instead of experiencing never-ending pain in Hell. This He has every right to do without compromising His goodness. He gives life, and He can take it away. But giving life and subjecting that life to ceaseless torture is something far below any decent human being, let alone the Author of love and mercy Himself.

### **DO WE DESERVE IT?—**

For many years, the church has believed the eternal torture model of Hell. This has naturally prompted many to ask the logical question "Why would a just God feel the need to punish us so severely?" In other words, "What has any human being ever done that could possibly deserve such a harsh sentence? How can anyone say that there even exists such a crime as to merit this type of punishment?"

This is a very serious question that is not so easy to contend with. After all, there is no civilized society on the face of the planet that would willfully keep people alive over many years for the sole purpose of torturing them. Even when people are subjected to torture, it is usually to gain information from them or, at the very least, to serve as a warning for others. And even then, it is limited to a certain period of time—not for years or decades by any means. If wicked human beings are too merciful to consider such cruel methods of punishment even for a season, why would our Heavenly Father choose such an agonizing procedure that lasts for an eternity?

For years of Christian history, people have tried to find reason for how a loving, merciful God would feel justified in punishing wickedness in this fashion. The most popular explanation for this is accredited to St. Thomas Aquinas who stated that "Sins against an infinite God deserve infinite recompense." Aquinas believed that sins committed against someone are proportionally as bad as the victim is good. In other words, if the inflicted party were a bad person who didn't deserve to be treated well, then a crime committed against him would not be as serious as the very same crime committed against a kind, loving, hardworking citizen. And since God is infinitely loving, a sin against Him can only be made right with an infinitely long and harsh punishment.

Traditionalist Jeff Spencer makes the following assertions about the justice of Hell:

The eternal punishing of the unbeliever in hell also maintains the justice of God because... it is the punishment that fits the crime. Even though the sin was committed in time, it warrants an eternal punishment because the sin was against an infinitely holy God. Systematic Theologian William G. T. Shedd aptly states:

"Endless punishment is rational, because sin is an infinite evil; infinite not because committed by an infinite being, but against one....To torture a dumb beast is a crime; to torture a man is a greater crime. To steal from one's own mother is more heinous than to steal from a fellow citizen. The person who transgresses is the same in each instance; but the different worth and dignity of the objects upon whom his action terminates makes the difference in the gravity of the two offenses."

Theologian Norman Geisler concurs:

"Only eternal punishment will suffice for sins against the eternal God... Furthermore, no sin can be tolerated as long as God exists, and He is eternal. Hence, the punishment for sin must also be eternal."

(Spencer, Jeff. "The Destruction of Hell: Annihilationism Examined" *Christian Apologetics Journal, Volume 1, No.1, spring 1998*. Copyright © 1998 by Southern Evangelical Seminary)

This argument has a few major problems associated with it. First of all, the idea that the severity of a crime is dependant on the "different worth and dignity" of the offended persons is a completely medieval notion that the Bible expressly teaches against. The Law of Moses was given largely in part to guide God's people away from this erroneous doctrine. Through Moses, God clearly taught that, no matter who a person was, they could not kill another human being without consequence. When a crime is committed, regardless of how unloving the victim might be, the punishment had to be the same—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. All throughout the Bible, God is shown to be no respecter of persons. He also counsels us against showing any favoritism (James 2, for example).

Secondly, the above argument fully avoids the real issue. Yes, God is an infinite God. I certainly don't argue against that point. He is infinitely loving, infinitely holy, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal. He's all of those things, but what does it mean? Does God's being

infinitely holy really mean that even one small sin (the kind that Christians commit many times a day) is so offensive to Him that the only thing that can make it right is to suffer agonizing cruelty for trillions upon trillions upon trillions of years? Let's just think for a moment about the logic behind this. After the first billion years or so, would an infinitely loving God really think "No, that's not quite enough"? What practical meaning could the description "infinitely loving" even have if God can allow the never-ending anguish of billions of people and still deserve the title? Do we just call Him all of those nice things because we have to? Or is it because God really is loving, holy, etc.?

For many years, theologians such as Aquinas have worked hard to show how sin could deserve the fate of eternal torture. They explain that any sin deserves this penalty, and it's only by God's grace that some are saved from it. As much as they'll defend their position, I doubt they would feel the same way if God gave everyone "what we deserve." If we truly deserve it, then God shouldn't have to provide a way out in order to be a just God. Would St. Thomas and others feel as good about the justice of sinners if they themselves were expected to pay for their sins in the same way? After all, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God ([Rom. 3:23](#)). Could the Lord still be loving and kind if he provided no way of forgiveness—if every sinner went to Hell to experience unending torture, no matter what? This is, after all, what they claim everyone deserves. Would anyone feel that this sentence is just if they learned that, because of that first sin they committed, they would unquestionably be subjected to endless pain and torment with no way of escape? When looked at in this light, eternal retribution doesn't seem quite as reasonable, does it?

On the other hand, annihilation still proves reputable. Of course we deserve this! We were only created by God's grace anyway, so if God had chosen not to give eternal life to anyone, He would still be shown merciful for giving us the life that we had on earth. But thankfully, He has offered us more than what we deserve. He has given us His son, so that we might be forgiven of our sins and have the eternal life that we never could have earned on our own. When subjected to the same scrutiny, this annihilation model proves much more consistent.

When people use these arguments, I'm sure their intentions are good. But by employing all of this jargon about the infiniteness of our creator, what they are doing is clouding up simple God-given logic. Sin is sin. A crime is a crime. It doesn't matter how nice and loving the victim is. Most people have no trouble understanding this because they already know it in their hearts to be true. Let's suppose for a moment that a kind, holy, loving man had his wallet stolen. After a day, they found the criminal and allowed the victim to choose his offender's sentence. Imagine if the kind, loving man used the argument "Because I am kind and loving, your sin against me was much worse than stealing from someone else. Therefore, the only punishment fitting for you is to spend 40 years in my torture chamber." Wouldn't that raise some doubts as to the loving nature that this man claims to have? How much more so, if the man could make the sentence 40,000,000,000,000,000 years or more?

### **HEAVEN vs. HELL—**

In fact, I'm sure that most people, when they are honest with themselves, will admit that it would actually be better if God had not created someone at all than for them to be created and

ultimately live out an eternity in perpetual conscious torment. But God did create people, and He created us all with a free will. We can choose to do right, and we can choose to do wrong. We can choose to repent of our sins, or we can choose to reject God. Apparently, people can even choose to reject God without knowing that they are doing so.

The Bible makes it extremely clear that not all people go to Heaven. In fact, it seems quite evident that the majority do NOT go there (i.e. the wide and narrow gates of [Matthew 7:13](#)). So from the moment of birth, essentially, the odds are against you. This is no surprise to God, of course. He knows the end from the beginning. He knows who will turn to Him and who will reject Him. Yet He still, in all of His infinite love and knowledge, forms people in their mothers' wombs on a continual basis. And why not? Even if someone doesn't come to a saving faith, they still had the opportunity to live out a number of years on earth. After this time, most people don't make it, and they get exactly what they deserve: to be thrown into the Lake of Fire and obliterated from existence. The Lord mercifully gave them temporary life on the off-chance that they would choose eternal life in Heaven, and when they don't choose it, He has every right to mercifully destroy them (thus returning them to their previous state of non-existence). There is nothing in this doctrine that violates the scriptures or the nature of God.

On the other hand, there are millions (if not billions) who will go to Heaven leaving loved ones behind. Many of these loved ones will choose—or have already chosen—the wide path that leads to destruction. How will the saved in Heaven come to terms with this? Imagine that someone you love dearly (like a sibling, spouse or a son or daughter) was taken into a foreign country as a prisoner of war. What if you knew that this loved one was being tortured ceaselessly each day and night? How would that affect your enjoyment of life in a free country? Could you even sleep at night knowing the pain he/she would be enduring? Now imagine that you had the opportunity to die so that he/she could be set free. Most would not give even a second thought—of course it's worth it. If I were in the situation, I would instantly sacrifice my own life if only for the assurance that my wife could die and end the senseless torture that she was being made to endure. It doesn't take a hero to feel that way. That's just the nature of love. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" ([John 15:13](#)).

Thankfully, most of us will never be faced with such a situation on earth, but what about Heaven? Could any of us really enjoy Heaven with the knowledge that our loved ones were currently suffering ceaseless pain in Hell and would be for an eternity? Not only that, but if traditional doctrine is correct, the God Who we'll be praising forever is the very One Who invented this place of torment and created our friends knowing full well that they would reject Him and spend zillions of years in flames! And we'll worship Him continually with the knowledge that He could, at any time, end their suffering yet chooses not to. Something is wrong with this picture.

### **PLEASURE vs. PAIN—**

In our lives, we all make hundreds of little decisions each and every day. There are of course many different reasons for why we choose one option over another, but in almost every case, the decisions we make all boil down to one of two objectives. We are continually trying to seek pleasure and avoid pain. These are the two capital reasons for nearly every choice we ever make.

However, the two are not equal in their influence. Whenever someone is given the exclusive choice between seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, they will almost invariably choose to avoid pain.

Case in point, imagine that you have the opportunity to enjoy \$10,000,000 given to you each and every year for the rest of your life. But there is one small stipulation: you must first undergo one solid week of uninterrupted torture. Would you do it? Remember, you can live exactly as you've always wanted for the rest of your life—you get everything you want without working another day. What is one week of agony and torment when compared with the rest of your life in total bliss? Well, I'm sure it is quite clear to anyone reading this that one week of continuous pain can seem awfully significant. I for one wouldn't give the offer a second thought. I'll pass. I'm doing just fine, thank you. It frankly doesn't matter how many years of pleasure there might be, that torture part is just a lot more substantial.

The reason I bring this up, is because I feel that it is a very vivid illustration of something which seems to be largely overlooked in traditionalist church doctrine. No matter how good Heaven may be, there is no amount of good that can make up for what the lost are supposedly going to suffer (or are currently suffering) in Hell. I'm sure, at any moment, that those enjoying Heaven would instantly give it all up if they were given the chance to die and save their loved ones from the torture. I believe that almost anyone, if they were to answer with total honesty, would actually feel that it would be better if Heaven never even existed than for there to be both a Heaven and an eternal Hell. I don't take that statement lightly. How much happiness would it take for you to forget that dozens of people you love are being tormented in the worst way every second of their lives? Could someone truly say that any amount of delight in Heaven can make up for the never-ending, pain experienced by billions of people?

When people speak of God's goodness, they naturally point to His treatment of the saved. None of us deserves Heaven, and yet God, in all of His loving kindness has chosen to grant this unbelievable inheritance to those who have turned to Him for salvation. This is very true. God is wonderful and merciful to do this. Likewise, it is completely consistent with the love of our Savior to give the wicked what they deserve as well. They certainly don't deserve Heaven any more than we do, but they also haven't chosen Heaven. What they deserve is exactly what they have chosen: essentially to make this temporal existence all that there is. They have lived for themselves thinking only of this life here on earth, so that is all they will get. At the resurrection, they will be cast into the Lake of Fire and be obliterated. There is no reason to think that the God who created them is under any obligation to keep them alive in Hell or to allow them into His kingdom.

But suppose that God did choose to keep them alive in Hell. He is still every bit as good to us (the righteous) as He is in the annihilation model, but His treatment of the damned takes a decidedly vicious turn. In speaking of the compassion of God, we can point to all of the nice things He is doing for the saved race, but how can we ignore what is going on in Hell? What if Adolf Hitler was responsible for donating millions of dollars to charitable causes? What if he, between periods of overseeing his concentration camps, spent his Saturday afternoons working at a homeless shelter? What if he was a generous father and a loving family man? Would that make up for his treatment of the Jews? How much good would Hitler have to do to be considered a

sympathetic, loving, caring man in spite of the millions of the decent people he enslaved, tortured, and put to death? Surely there is no amount of good that can account for that!

Now, to add one more element to this scenario, remember that not everyone whom Hitler put to death would be declared righteous in God's sight. We think of Hitler's actions as absolutely horrendous, but if the church's traditional view of Hell is correct, his victims hadn't even experienced a taste of what was coming to them. They thought life at the mercy of the Nazis was bad enough, just wait until they are at the mercy of God—then they won't be so lucky.

I want to make it clear that I'm not blaspheming God in any way. I am not speaking out against the God Who is. I am speaking against a concept of God that I believe is an atrocious slander to His name.

### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE?—**

We've looked briefly at the dominant traditionalist line of reasoning for why human beings could deserve this kind of a punishment. Even if one accepts the flawed argument that our earthly sins merit a never-ending torture chamber, another question must still be examined: what is the point? Even if we do deserve everlasting Hell, why would God want us to experience that? What purpose is served by keeping people alive to torment them when it is too late for any of them to change their ways?

Every civilized society on earth understands this concept. No matter how terrible a convict may be, the worst that they may receive is the death penalty. Prisons are properly known as "correctional facilities" because they serve to correct the behavior of convicted criminals. Even in the case of a life sentence in prison, it exists for the purpose of dissuading other would-be lawbreakers away from a life of crime. In rare cases, the punishment of torture is exercised. Even then, it is either to retrieve information from someone or, at the very least, to serve as a warning to others. It is certainly not used for the sole purpose of making a criminal suffer—this would be inhumane.

Besides that, even if sinners did deserve this cruel and unusual punishment, is anything resolved through it? If sins against an infinite God deserved unending vengeance, does that mean that the sinners are somehow evening up the score by their suffering? After one hundred thousand years of ceaseless pain, are they any closer to having reconciled their sins against the Lord? Obviously not, if there is no end. If they cannot be made any more righteous by the flames or even pay a smidgen of the debt they owe, why on earth would God choose this fate for them to endure? If wicked, earthly, vengeful humans wouldn't stoop to this kind of senseless infliction of pain, is it really proper to assume it of the all-loving creator?

### **OPTIONS—**

Additionally, the typical doctrine of Hell cannot help but completely alter the motivation of new converts. Preachers ask people to come to Jesus and accept His loving gift of salvation, but what is really going through the mind of a sinner when they walk down the aisle after learning about Hell? While the message of Heaven is appealing, so much greater is the fear of spending eternity

in a fiery pit. Regardless of how extraordinary it may be, the goodness of Heaven can never compare in magnitude with the ruthlessness of Hell.

So, if someone truly believes in the two fates, they may correctly decide to come to Jesus, but what is their heart's motivation? Is it out of love for their Savior or out of fear of Hell? For most, it would clearly be the latter and rightfully so. Therefore, the choice they are making feels less like a choice and more like coercion. It is as if someone points a gun to your head and tells you that you must go somewhere or else be shot. You may *choose* to go, but it surely does not feel much like free will.

Allow me to make yet another analogy (I like analogies; what can I say?). Suppose for a moment that a wonderful man—Mr. Right—offers a marriage proposal to the woman he loves. "Marry me," he says, "and I will give you a life like you've never dreamed of before. You will be loved with the greatest commitment and passion that any woman has ever known. I will give you the finest house with all of the wonderful things you've ever wanted, and you will be happy for the rest of your days!"

Now suppose the woman is very flattered by the proposal, but is uncertain about whether or not she is ready for such a commitment. Asking for a few more days to think it over, Mr. Right answers, "You are welcome to take more time, but it's only fair that I warn you what will happen if you decline my generous offer. Your only option, other than spending paradise with me, is to be thrown into my underground dungeon, have your eyeballs plucked from their sockets, your fingers and toes cut off, and continually be burned with a soldering iron every hour, on the hour, for the rest of your life."

What do you suppose would be going through the young woman's mind at a time like this? I imagine that would change the way she feels about the man considerably. She might have previously accepted Mr. Right's proposal because of her love for him, but is there much chance of that now? Surely not. If she takes him seriously, she'll undoubtedly marry him, but not as much for love as out of genuine terror at the alternative.

Is this God's way of doing things? Does God want His people to turn to Him out of fear that they will be tortured otherwise? Where is the love in that? If everyone really believed in this doctrine, wouldn't that properly tarnish their concept of the Savior? I would imagine some might even have a hard time calling Him "Savior" at all. How merciful can it be to create a never-ending torture pit for everyone and then save only a few from it?

I should address a small issue at this time. There is a tendency in the Christian church to absolve God of any responsibility for Hell. After all, He isn't the one torturing people, right? To these arguments, I must remind readers that regardless of who physically inflicts the pain, if God designed this system, He must accept a great deal of responsibility for it. God is of course the final authority on anybody's destiny and can destroy lost souls or keep them alive at will. If He chooses to keep billions of people alive in unending punishment for their wrongs, we mustn't speak as if there is nothing He can do to change things.

Contrast this to the annihilation model. According to this theory, those not found written in the Lamb's Book of Life are cast into the Lake of Fire, which is the second death ([Rev. 20:12-15](#)). God created them in the first place and will destroy them in the end. These unsaved people get just what they have actually chosen. They lived life on earth as though there was nothing else to look forward to, and the wages of their sin is death. To say that they have willingly chosen everlasting burning is ludicrous, but it is clear that most people choose to live for this life alone. In the same way that they chose to live, they are essentially given no afterlife. However, some of us are saved from death in the Lake of Fire. We are saved from what we very clearly deserve.

Not many people would try to argue that we don't deserve to die. After all, we were graciously given the life we have, and God has no obligation to keep us alive if He doesn't want to. Never-ending torture, on the other hand, is a punishment we wouldn't wish on our worst enemy. Therefore, to say that Jesus has chosen to save us from the death we deserve is very consistent with His merciful, loving nature. Then He really is our caring Savior.

## CONCLUSION—

Support can be found through the Holy Scriptures to back up the case for eternal torture as well as the case for annihilation in Hell. In coming to a conclusion, therefore, one must take this to heart and study all of God's Word to find which model fits best with the overall thrust of Scripture. From my study of the Bible, it seems to say much more about the death of the wicked than about their torture. Numerous verses use the terminology of life and immortality only when depicting Heaven while reserving words such as death, perishing, and destruction to describe Hell. Furthermore, there is not even one verse in the entire Bible that teaches the supposed "immortality of the soul" doctrine so prevalent in most Christian theology. Instead, it is made very clear that only God has eternal life, and He bestows immortality only to those whom He chooses—not to everyone. In reading the Bible for its plain meaning, there is no reason to feel obligated to believe that human beings will be kept alive in a never-ending, torturous Hell.

Furthermore, the Bible gives a very clear picture about the nature and character of God the Father and of His Son Jesus Christ. God is love. All His ways are good. He is more loving than any human being could ever hope to be. Everything in the Bible corroborates this. If on the other hand the doctrine of unending, conscious pain for the wicked is added to the message of God, He can no longer be considered loving in any practical sense. This view stands in absolute conflict with the loving character of the Almighty God as revealed in the Bible, and the two cannot co-exist.

There is also very little if any corroboration for the belief that human beings might deserve such a punishment. For years of Christian history, great theologians have worked out only meager rationalizations that don't stand up to scrutiny. Similarly, the question of the purpose for such punishment is completely avoided in these arguments. There is no valid reason for a loving God to subject people to torture without end when no more good could possibly come of it.

Finally, it is my opinion that the belief in eternal punishment is a serious detriment to the entire message of salvation. It turns the "Good News" into bad news. Even when people turn to Jesus, it is not as much to embrace His loving gift as to avoid what they believe is the only other

alternative. This significantly alters the way many view the Almighty God and causes countless others to cast doubt on the reliability of the Gospel.

The eternal torment model of Hell creates countless problems when set against the clear teaching of God's character. Neither does it stand up to scrutiny in systematic theology. Lastly, and most importantly, the overall credo of scripture plainly teaches against it while frequently reiterating the vocabulary of death for the unrighteous. Keeping all of these things in mind, it seems overwhelmingly evident to me that the only consistent way to interpret God's Word on this subject is to believe in the ultimate annihilation of unbelievers in the Lake of Fire.