

Will a Loving God Punish People Forever in Hell?

Millions believe that God is loving and merciful, but also that He has condemned millions to suffer torment for all eternity. Is something wrong with this picture, or is the problem a distorted belief about hell?

Take this simple test. Or perhaps it's better if you just imagined it, since the actual test would prove quite painful.

Light a match, then hold your finger in its tiny flame for five seconds. What happens? You'll likely scream involuntarily and suffer misery for several days from a painful burn.

Perhaps you've seen a burn victim who was disfigured in some horrible accident, his flesh gnarled and misshapen. Imagine being trapped in flames that would char and burn away your skin in the same way. What would that kind of agony feel like if it went on for a minute? For a year? For a *lifetime*? For *ever and ever*?

Most people would find the idea horrifying almost beyond imagination. They would understandably be aghast and sickened that anyone might willingly torture another person in that way.

Why, then, are so many willing to accept the idea that the God they worship and hold in highest esteem would willingly inflict such punishment not on just a few, but on a great multitude of people who die every single day? How can such a belief possibly square with the Bible's description of a God who is infinitely loving and merciful?

Just what is the truth about hell?

Hell through the centuries

The traditional view of hell as a fiery cauldron of punishment has been taught for centuries. Perhaps one of the earliest to expound this view among Christians was the Catholic theologian Tertullian, who lived around A.D. 160-225. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage also wrote: "The damned will burn for ever in hell. Devouring flames will be their eternal portion. Their torments will never have diminution or end" (quoted by Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview*, 1986, p. 163).

This belief has been officially reiterated over the centuries. An edict from the Council of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in 543 states: "Whoever says or thinks that the punishment of demons and the wicked will not be eternal...let him be anathema" (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 21).

The Lateran church council in 1215 reaffirmed its belief in eternal torture of the wicked in these words: "The damned will go into everlasting punishment with the devil" (Toon, p. 164). The Augsburg Confession of 1530 reads: "Christ will return...to give eternal life and everlasting joy

to believers and the elect, but to condemn ungodly men and the devils to hell and eternal punishment" (Toon, p. 131).

Teachings on the subject of hell have by no means been consistent through the centuries. Beliefs about hell have varied widely, depending on which theologian's or church historian's ideas one reads. Generally speaking, the most common belief has been that hell is a place in which wicked people are tortured forever, but never consumed, by ever-burning flames.

Hell's location has been a subject of much discussion. Some have believed it to be in the sun. For centuries the common view was that hell is inside the earth in a vast subterranean chamber.

The most comprehensive description of hell as a place, as man commonly views it, is found not in the Bible but rather in the 14th-century work *The Divine Comedy*, written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. In the first part of this work, called "The Inferno," Dante described an imaginary journey through hell replete with its fiery sufferings.

A more modern interpretation rejects the idea of physical torment and asserts that the torture of hell is mental anguish caused by separation from God. A recent survey of modern attitudes revealed that 53 percent of Americans embrace this perspective (*U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 31, 2000, p. 47).

Pope John Paul II "declared that hell is 'not a punishment imposed externally by God' but is the natural consequence of the unrepentant sinner's choice to live apart from God" (ibid., p. 48). Still others have rejected the doctrine of hell outright and believe everyone will be saved.

Why do we see so much diversity in beliefs about hell? Like belief in the immortality of the soul, common misconceptions of hell are rife with the ideas of men rather than the teachings of the Bible.

The popular concept of hell is a mixture of small bits of Bible truth combined with pagan ideas and human imagination. As we will see, this has produced a grossly inaccurate portrayal of what happens to the wicked after death.

An angry God

One of the most graphic descriptions of the torments of hell as conceived by men was given by the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards in a 1741 sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

He said: "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrows made ready...[by] an angry God...It is nothing but His mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction! 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..."

"You are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended Him...and yet it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment..."

"O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of God...You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder."

This human concept of hell was so terrible that the prospect of such a fate caused great anguish, fear and anxiety for many Puritans. "The heavy emphasis on hell and damnation combined with an excessive self-scrutiny led many into clinical depression: suicide seems to have been prevalent" (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 1993, p. 284).

The Puritans were not the only ones tormented by fear of hell. Many people have been terrorized by the thought of hell ever since this non-biblical concept crept into religious teaching. Other ministers and teachers have, like Jonathan Edwards, used a similar approach to frighten people into belief and obedience.

One of the reasons this concept of hell survived is because theologians believed the teaching deterred people from evil. "It was thought that, if the fear of eternal punishment were removed, most people would behave without any moral restraint whatever and that society would collapse into an anarchical orgy" (Walker, p. 4).

Could a compassionate God torture people forever?

Is it possible to reconcile this view of a God who terrorizes people through the fear of eternal torment in hell with the compassionate and merciful God we meet in the Bible?

God is a God of love who does not want any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He tells us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). "He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (verse 45). Yet the traditional view of hell would have us believe that God vengefully torments evil people *for all eternity*— not a few decades or even centuries, but for an *infinite* length of time.

The idea that God sentences people to eternal punishment is so repulsive that it has turned some away from belief in God and Christianity.

One such example is Charles Darwin. In his private autobiography he wrote: "Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete...I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe...will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine" (quoted by Paul Martin, *The Healing Mind: The Vital Links Between Brain and Behavior, Immunity and Disease*, 1997, p. 327).

The problem is not that the Bible teaches this "damnable doctrine," but that men have *misunderstood* what the Bible says.

Other aspects of the traditional teaching of hell simply offend the senses. One such belief is that righteous people, who are saved, will be able to witness the torments of the wicked. As one author explains the view some hold, "part of the happiness of the blessed consists in contemplating the torments of the damned. This sight gives them joy because it is a manifestation of God's justice and hatred of sin, but chiefly because it provides a contrast which heightens their awareness of their own bliss" (Walker, p. 29).

This scenario is especially revolting for several reasons. According to such twisted reasoning, parents would inevitably witness the suffering of their own children and vice versa, relishing in it. Husbands and wives would feel joy in seeing unbelieving spouses tortured forever. Worst of all, the doctrine paints God as sadistic, cruel and merciless.

Those who insist that the Bible teaches eternal torment by fire should ask whether such a belief is consistent with what the Bible teaches us about God. For example, how could God justly deal with those who have lived and died without having ever received an opportunity to be saved? This would include the millions who died as babies as well as the billions of unbelievers or idolaters who lived and died never knowing God or His Son. Regrettably, the vast majority of all those who have ever lived fall into this category.

Some theologians reason around this difficulty by assuming that those who never had the opportunity to know God or hear the name of Jesus Christ will be given a sort of free pass. The rationale is that since their state of ignorance is due to circumstances beyond their control, God will admit them into heaven regardless of their lack of repentance. If true, this raises a troubling possibility—that missionary efforts to such areas could be the cause of people who do not accept their teachings being lost!

Quandaries such as this have painted many theologians and other Christians into a corner. Accordingly, some have challenged the traditional concept of a hell of eternal torment through the centuries. "In every generation people keep questioning the orthodox belief in everlasting conscious torment" (*Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, editor, 1996, p. 140).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, church councils through the ages have upheld the doctrine. Firmly rooted in traditional Christian belief, it's an idea that will not go away. A *U.S. News and World Report* poll from not too long ago shows that more Americans believe in hell today than in the 1950s or even the 1980s and early 1990s (Jan. 31, 2000, p. 46).

The prospect of hell will continue to haunt people. As *U.S. News and World Report* concluded, "Hell's powerful images will no doubt continue to loom over humanity, as they have for more than 2,000 years, as a grim and ominous reminder of the reality of evil and its consequences."

More than one *hell* in the Bible

So what is the truth about hell? What does the Bible really teach? Many are surprised to learn that the Bible speaks of *three* hells—but not in the sense that is widely believed. Let us discover why there is so much confusion about hell.

From the original languages in which the Bible was written, one Hebrew word and three Greek words are translated "hell" in our English-language Bibles. The four words convey three different meanings.

The Hebrew word *sheol*, used in the Old Testament, has the same meaning as *hades*, one of the three Greek words translated "hell" in the New Testament.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary explains the meaning of both words: "The Greek word Hades...is sometimes, but misleadingly, translated 'hell' in English versions of the N[ew] T[estament]. It refers to the place of the dead...The old Hebrew concept of the place of the dead, most often called Sheol...is usually translated as Hades, and the Greek term was naturally and commonly used by Jews writing in Greek" (1992, Vol. 3, p. 14, "Hades, Hell").

Both *sheol* and *hades* refer simply to *the grave*. A comparison of an Old Testament and a New Testament scripture confirm this. Psalm 16:10 says, "For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption." In Acts 2:27, the apostle Peter quotes this verse and shows that it is a reference to Jesus Christ. Here the Greek word *hades* is substituted for the Hebrew *sheol*.

Where did Christ go when He died? His spirit returned to God (Luke 23:46; see "[The Spirit in Man](#)"). His body was placed in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. The two passages, in Psalms and Acts, tell us Jesus' flesh did not decay in the grave because God resurrected Him.

Many scriptures that use the term *hell* in the King James Version are simply talking about the grave, the place where everyone, whether good or evil, goes at death. The Hebrew word *sheol* is used in the Old Testament 65 times. In the King James Version it is translated "grave" 31 times, "hell" 31 times and "pit"—a hole in the ground—three times.

The Greek word *hades* is used 11 times in the New Testament. In the King James translation, in all instances but one the term *hades* is translated "hell." The one exception is 1 Corinthians 15:55, where it is translated "grave." In the New King James Version, the translators avoided misconceptions by simply using the original Greek word *hades* in all 11 instances.

One word is for demon imprisonment

A second Greek word, *tartaroo*, is also translated "hell" in the New Testament. This word is used only once in the Bible (2 Peter:2:4), where it refers to the current restraint or imprisonment of the fallen angels, otherwise known as demons.

The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* explains that *tartaroo* means "to confine in Tartaros" and that "Tartaros was the Greek name for the mythological abyss where rebellious gods were confined" (Lawrence Richards, 1985, "Heaven and Hell," p. 337).

Peter uses this reference to contemporary mythology to show that the sinning angels were "delivered...into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment." These fallen angels are now restrained while awaiting their ultimate judgment for their rebellion against God and destructive influence on humanity.

The place where they are imprisoned is not some dark or fiery netherworld. Rather, their confinement is *on the earth*, where they wield influence over the nations and over individuals. The Gospels record that Jesus Christ and His apostles had very real encounters with Satan and His demons (Matthew 4:1-11; 8:16, 28-33; 9:32-33; John 13:26-27). Jesus even referred to Satan as the *ruler* of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

The term *tartaroo* applies only to demons. Nowhere does it refer to a fiery hell in which human beings are punished after death.

Another word for burning—burning up, that is

Only with the remaining word translated "hell," the Greek word *gehenna*, do we see some elements people commonly associate with the traditional view of hell—but *not* in the manner portrayed in the hell of men's imagination.

Gehenna refers to a valley just outside Jerusalem. The word is derived from the Hebrew *Gai-Hinnom*, the Valley of Hinnom (Joshua:18:16). "Religiously it was a place of idolatrous and human sacrifices . . . In order to put an end to these abominations, [Judah's King] Josiah polluted it with human bones and other corruptions (2 Kgs. 23:10, 13, 14)" (Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament*, 1992, p. 360).

At the time of Jesus this valley was what we might call the city dump—the place where trash was thrown and consumed in the fires that constantly burned there. The carcasses of dead animals—and the bodies of despised criminals—were also cast into Gehenna to be burned.

Jesus thus uses this particular location and what took place there to help His listeners clearly understand the fate the unrepentant will suffer in the future. They would have easily grasped what He meant.

Immortal worms in hell?

In Mark 9:47-48, for example, Jesus specifically refers to *Gehenna* and what took place there. But without a proper historical background, many people draw erroneous conclusions as to what He said.

Notice His words: "It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell [*gehenna*] fire—where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" Any inhabitant of Jerusalem would have immediately understood what Jesus meant, since Gehenna—the Valley of Hinnom—was just outside the city walls to the south.

Without this understanding, people commonly end up with several misconceptions about this verse. Some believe the "worm" is a reference to pangs of conscience that condemned people suffer in hell: "'The worm that dieth not' was nearly always interpreted figuratively, as meaning the stings of envy and regret" (Walker, p. 61). Many believe that the phrase "the fire is not quenched" is a reference to ever-burning fires that torture the damned.

This scripture has been notoriously interpreted out of context. Notice that the phrase "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" appears in quotation marks. Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 66:24. A proper understanding of His statement begins there.

The context in Isaiah 66 refers to a time when, God says, "all flesh shall come to worship before Me" (verse 23). It is a time when the wicked will be no more. What will have happened to them? In verse 24 we read that people "will go out and *look upon the dead bodies* of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind" (NIV).

Notice that in this verse Jesus notes that the bodies affected by the worms are *dead*. These are not living people writhing in fire. When Jesus returns, He will fight those who resist Him (Revelation 19:11-15). Those who are slain in the battle will not be buried; their bodies will be left on the ground, where scavenging birds and maggots will consume their flesh.

According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (1980), the original Hebrew word translated "worm" in Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:47-48 means "worm, maggot, [or] larvae."

Neither Isaiah nor Christ is talking about immortal worms. The vermin of which they speak, maggots, would not die *while* maggots because, sustained with flesh to eat, they would live to turn into flies. The flies would then lay eggs that hatch into more maggots (the larvae of flies), perpetuating the cycle until there is nothing left for them to consume.

This background information helps us better understand Jesus Christ's words. In His day, when the bodies of dead animals or executed criminals were cast into the burning trash heap of Gehenna, those bodies would be destroyed by maggots, by the fires that were constantly burning there or by a combination of both. Historically a body that was not buried, but was subjected to burning, was viewed as accursed.

What does Jesus mean in Mark 9:48 when He quotes Isaiah in saying, "the fire is not quenched"? With the preceding background we can understand. He means simply that the fire will burn until the bodies of the wicked are consumed. This expression, used several times in Scripture, refers to fire that consumes *entirely* (Ezekiel 20:47). An unquenched fire is one that has not been extinguished. Rather, it *burns itself out* when it consumes everything and has no more combustible material to keep it going.

When are the wicked punished?

But, we might ask, *when* does this punishment take place?

As we saw earlier, Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote of a time *after* the Messiah establishes His reign on earth. Only then would all humanity "come and bow down" before Him (Isaiah 66:23, NIV). Only then would this prophecy be fulfilled.

Jesus uses a common site of trash disposal in His day—the burning garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem's walls—to illustrate the *ultimate fate* of the wicked in what the Scriptures call a lake of fire. Just as the refuse of the city was consumed by maggots and fire, so will the wicked be burned up—*consumed*—by a future Gehenna-like fire more than 1,000 years after Christ returns (Revelation 20:7-9, 12-15).

Peter explains that at this time "the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be *burned up*" (2 Peter 3:10). The implication is that the surface of the earth will become a molten mass, obliterating any evidence of human wickedness.

What will happen after that? The apostle John writes: "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Revelation 21:1). The entire earth will be transformed into a suitable abode for the righteous who, by that time, will have inherited eternal life.

The destruction of soul and body in hell

Another place where Jesus speaks of *gehenna* fire is Matthew 10:28: "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 [*gehenna*]."

We should notice that Jesus does not speak of people suffering everlasting torment. He says that God can *destroy—annihilate—* both the body and soul in Gehenna fire.

Jesus here explains that, when one man kills another, the resulting death is only temporary because God can raise the victim to life again. But when *God* destroys one in hell (*gehenna*), the resulting death is eternal. There is no resurrection from this fate, which the Bible calls "the second death."

The Bible explains that unrepentant sinners are cast into the lake of fire, or *gehenna*, at the end of the age. "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

This verse and others like it show that the doctrine of universal salvation is false. Not everyone will be saved. Some will, in the end, refuse to repent—and they will suffer punishment. But that punishment is not to burn in fire without ending. Rather, it is to die a death from which there is no resurrection.

As we discussed earlier, the wicked will be destroyed. They will not live for eternity in another place or state of everlasting anguish. They will reap their destruction in the lake of fire at the end

of the age. They will be consumed virtually instantaneously by the heat of the fire and will never live again.

The wicked burned to ashes

Another passage that graphically illustrates the utter destruction of the wicked is found in Malachi 4:1: "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall *burn them up*,' says the LORD of hosts, 'that will leave them neither root nor branch.'"

The time setting is the end, when God will bring retribution on the wicked for their rebellious, reprehensible ways. To those who surrender to God and live in obedience to Him, God says: "'You shall trample the wicked, for *they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet* on the day that I do this,' says the LORD of hosts" (verse 3).

God, speaking through the prophet Malachi, makes clear the ultimate fate of the wicked. They are to be uprooted like a nonproductive tree, leaving not so much as a root or twig. They will be consumed by the flames of the lake of fire, leaving only ashes.

The Bible does teach that the wicked will be punished by fire—but *not* the mythical hell of men's imagination. God is a God of mercy and love. Those who willfully choose to reject His way of life, characterized by obedience to His law of love (Romans 13:10), will *die*, not suffer forever. They will be consumed by fire and forgotten. They will not be tortured for all eternity.

Remember that eternal life is something that God must grant, and He will grant it to only those who repent and follow Him—not those who persist in rebellion against Him.

Realize that the final death of the incorrigibly wicked in a lake of fire is an act not only of justice, but of mercy on God's part. To allow them to continue to live on in unrepentant, eternal rebellion would cause themselves and others only great sorrow and anguish. God will not put them through that, much less torture them for all eternity in excruciating torment without end.

The encouraging truth of the Bible is that God is indeed a God of great mercy, wisdom and righteous judgment. As Psalm 19:9 assures us, "The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether."