

Final Fate of the Wicked

Presentation Outline

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Overview

The concept of hell as eternal torment is based on two lies: that we possess an immortal soul, and that God inflicts torture.

Hell is a bad translation of the Biblical words since it comes from a different mythology—Nordic/Anglo-Saxon.

Greek words used: *Hades* (place of the dead, shadows. Realm of the god Hades, ruler of the underworld). *Gehenna* (place name). It's the name of the valley just outside Jerusalem where the city's trash was burned.

Hebrew word: *sheol*, the place of the dead (not seen as burning torture).

The end of the wicked is important since it says a great deal about the nature and character of God. How does God destroy? There is a difference between the first death and the second death. The real question is not how God treats his friends, but how he treats his enemies.

Questions

How should we speak to those who believe in hell? While we may not believe in an eternally-burning hell, what about the lake of fire? It may not be forever, but surely this is still "torture"? Why does God resurrect the wicked only to kill them again? How do we view the final fate of the wicked?

Biblical material

What did Jesus say about hell? He used two words to describe hell: hades and Gehenna. Hades simply means "the lower regions" which were thought by the Greeks to be the place of the dead. In fact the term can be simply translated "depths" as in: "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths [hades]." Matthew 11:23 NIV.

Hades was equivalent to the Old Testament word "sheol" which is often translated "grave". No thought here of unending torture in terrifying flames. Jesus' idea of hell is clearly linked with what he said about death—a sleep in which there is no consciousness (see John 11:11-14).

Gehenna is a place name. It refers to the Hinnom valley outside Jerusalem which was the rubbish tip! Here all the city's junk was brought to be buried or burned. There's nothing in this picture of "hell" to suggest eternal torment by demons--only a place where rubbish was brought to be totally disposed of. The fires burned everything up until they were completely destroyed. So too in the final rubbish heap of the world--all will be consumed. Jesus spoke of both "soul and body" being destroyed in hell (Matthew 10:28).

So while the End does bring the total elimination of the wicked, the hell of Jesus and the Bible is not the traditional doctrine of endless torture.

Isn't the punishment and fire "everlasting" (Matthew 25:46,41)? Yes, that's what the Bible says. But not everlasting in its duration, only in its results. The people of Sodom were destroyed for their terrible wickedness. Fire rained down on them. They were totally destroyed, burned to ashes. And then the fire went out—it's not burning today. The Bible speaks of that fire as "eternal"—because of its eternal consequences: "Remember Sodom and Gomorrah...they paid the penalty in eternal fire, and example for all to see." (Jude 7 NEB) An example of total destruction, not eternal burning in torment.

For if the soul is immortal, and the wicked have such souls too, then even God's end-time fire won't destroy them. The result is an ever-burning, torturing hell. But the Bible says that "The soul that sins shall die"; "God only has immortality." (Ezekiel 18:20; 1 Timothy 6:16). The Bible knows nothing of an immortal soul flying away at death either to heaven or hell, or some place in between! Belief in the complete eradication of the wicked fits in perfectly with the Bible message in which God makes all things new. (Revelation 21:5).

Imagine the perfect universe of the future that still has a place of evil, torture, agony and pain! How could that be possible? The end-time fire of destruction does not burn forever, it merely purifies and cleanses. "That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness." (2 Peter 3:12,13 NIV)

Consequences of Believing in an Eternal Hell

Hell says God is cruel and sadistic. Hell says God is unjust. Hell says God is vengeful and vindictive.

Even we in our imperfect system of justice believe the punishment should fit the crime. What justice is there in making any punishment continue forever for a crime committed over an average of seventy years? So what about all the flames and torments which some so readily (and gladly, it seems!) describe? Are they carried out by a sane and humane being?

What kind of choice does this God give us? Do as I say or I'll fearfully torment you forever? Does that sound like free choice?

And what about God's very nature? He came and died to show us who he really was, what he was really like--the true God of love. Hell negates all that. It proves that the devil is right when he makes God out to be an autocratic tyrant who is unfair, arbitrary, harsh and cruel.

The picture of hell that men describe is demonic. The Devil is the true author of hell. But believing that God is behind such evil torture, many have turned away in horror and disgust at such a Being who is so much worse than us ourselves!

For although some may be scared to God through hellfire preaching, many more are turned against such an appalling God. Hell is not disciplining punishment--because no one can repent. Hell is vindictive sadism on a divine scale.

Quotes on Hell

“I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly human can believe in everlasting punishment... I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hellfire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty.” Bertrand Russell, Why I am not a Christian.

“It is the Augustinian theory [traditional view of hell] which endangers faith, and has made shipwreck of faith in the case of multitudes, by representing God as a Being of boundless injustice, caprice (sic), and cruelty.” Henry Constable, Duration and Nature of Final Punishment, 166.

“The idea that a good God would send people to a burning hell is utterly damnable to me--the ravings of insanity, superstition gone to seed! I don't want anything to do with such a God.” Luther Burbank.

“[Hell] makes man an eternal victim and God an eternal fiend. It is the one infinite horror.... Beyond this Christian dogma, savagery cannot go.” Robert Ingersoll.

“The God who 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 will have no compassion upon you, he will not forbear the executions of his wrath, or in the least lighten his hand; there shall be no moderation or mercy...” Jonathan Edwards, Sermon: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”.

“Conscience, judgement, memory, all tortured.... Thine heart beating high with fever, thy pulse rattling at an enormous rate in agony, thy limbs cracking like the martyrs in the fire and yet unburnt, thyself put in a vessel of hot oil, pained yet coming out undestroyed, all thy veins becoming a road for the hot feet of pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the devil shall ever play his diabolical tune...” Charles Spurgeon, Sermon No. 66.

“Look into this prison. In the middle of it there is a boy, a young man, He is silent; despair is upon him. He stands straight up. His eyes are burning like two burning coals. Two long flames come out of his ears. His breathing is difficult. Sometimes he opens his mouth and breath of a blazing fire rolls out of it. But listen! there is a sound just like that of a kettle boiling. Is it really a kettle which is boiling? No; then what is it? Hear what it is. The blood is boiling in the scalded veins of that boy. The brain is boiling and bubbling in his head. The marrow is boiling in his bones! J. Furniss, Tracts for Spiritual Reading.

“In order that nothing be wanting to the happiness of the blessed in heaven, a perfect view is granted them of the torment of the damned!” Thomas Aquinas.

“It were better to have no opinion of God at all than such an opinion as is unworthy of him.” Francis Bacon. [Hell is such an opinion!]

EGW commentary

An eternally burning hell preached from the pulpit, and kept before the people, does injustice to the benevolent character of God. It presents Him as the veriest tyrant in the universe. This widespread dogma has turned thousands to universalism, infidelity, and atheism. {1T 344-5}

If the love of God will not induce the rebel to yield, the terrors of an eternal hell will not drive him to repentance. Besides, it does not seem a proper way to win souls to Jesus, by appealing to one of the lowest attributes of the mind, abject fear. {1T 39-40}

It is beyond the power of the human mind to estimate the evil which has been wrought by the heresy of eternal torment. The religion of the Bible, full of love and goodness, and abounding in compassion, is darkened by superstition and clothed with terror. When we consider in what false colors Satan has painted the character of God, can we wonder that our merciful Creator is feared, dreaded, and even hated? The appalling views of God which have spread over the world from the teachings of the pulpit have made thousands, yes, millions, of skeptics and infidels. The theory of eternal torment is one of the false doctrines that constitute the wine of the abomination of Babylon, of which she makes all nations drink. {GC 536}

God destroys no man. Everyone who is destroyed will have destroyed himself. Everyone who stifles the admonitions of conscience is sowing the seeds of unbelief, and these will produce a sure harvest. {COL 84}

This is not an act of arbitrary power on the part of God. The rejecters of His mercy reap that which they have sown. God is the fountain of life; and when one chooses the service of sin, he separates from God, and thus cuts himself off from life. He is "alienated from the life of God." Christ says, "All they that hate Me love death." Eph. 4:18; Prov. 8:36. God gives them existence for a time that they may develop their character and reveal their principles. This accomplished, they receive the results of their own choice. By a life of rebellion, Satan and all who unite with him place themselves so out of harmony with God that His very presence is to them a consuming fire. The glory of Him who is love will destroy them. {DA 764}

Just what took place in Pharaoh's heart will take place in every soul that neglects to cherish the light and walk promptly in its rays. God destroys no one. The sinner destroys himself by his own impenitence... We want all to understand how the soul is destroyed. It is not that God sends out a decree that man shall not be saved. He does not throw a darkness before the eyes which cannot be penetrated. But man at first resists a motion of the Spirit of God, and, having once resisted, it is less difficult to do so the second time, less the third, and far less the fourth. {5T 120}

But when men pass the limits of divine forbearance, that restraint is removed. God does not stand toward the sinner as an executioner of the sentence against transgression; but He leaves the rejectors of His mercy to themselves, to reap that which they have sown. {GC 36}

We are not to regard God as waiting to punish the sinner for his sin. The sinner brings the punishment upon himself. His own actions start a train of circumstances that bring the sure result. Every act of transgression reacts upon the sinner, works in him a change of character, and makes it more easy for him to transgress again. By choosing to sin, men separate themselves from God, cut themselves off from the channel of blessing, and the sure result is ruin and death. {1SM 235}

To sin, wherever found, "our God is a consuming fire." Heb. 12:29. In all who submit to His power the Spirit of God will consume sin. But if men cling to sin, they become identified with it. Then the glory of God, which destroys sin, must destroy them. Jacob, after his night of wrestling with the Angel, exclaimed, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." Gen. 32:30. Jacob had been guilty of a great sin in his conduct toward Esau; but he had repented. His transgression had been forgiven, and his sin purged; therefore he could endure the revelation of God's presence. But wherever men came before God while willfully cherishing evil, they were destroyed. At the second advent of Christ the wicked shall be consumed "with the Spirit of His mouth," and destroyed "with the brightness of His coming." 2 Thess. 2:8. The light of the glory of God, which imparts life to the righteous, will slay the wicked. {DA 107-8}

Satan has ascribed to God all the evils to which the flesh is heir. He has represented him as a God who delights in the sufferings of his creatures, who is revengeful and implacable. It was Satan who originated the doctrine of eternal torment as a punishment for sin, because in this way he could lead men into infidelity and rebellion, distract souls, and dethrone the human reason. {RH, November 17, 1891}

Heaven, looking down, and seeing the delusions into which men were led, knew that a divine Instructor must come to earth. Men in ignorance and moral darkness must have light, spiritual light; for the world knew not God, and he must be revealed to their understanding. Truth looked down from heaven, and saw not the reflection of her image; for dense clouds of moral darkness and gloom enveloped the world, and the Lord Jesus alone was able to roll back the clouds; for he was the light of the world. By his presence he could dissipate the gloomy shadow that Satan had cast between man and God. Darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people. Through the accumulated misrepresentations of the enemy, many were so deceived that they worshiped a false god, clothed with the attributes of the satanic character. {RH, November 17, 1891 par. 6}

Satan told his angels to make a special effort to spread the deception and lie first repeated to Eve in Eden, Thou shalt not surely die. And as the error was received by the people, and they believed that man was immortal, Satan led them still further to believe that the sinner would live in eternal misery. Then the way was prepared for Satan to work through his representatives, and hold up God before the people as a revengeful tyrant; that those who do not please him, he will plunge into hell, and cause them ever to feel his wrath; and that they will suffer unutterable anguish, while he will look down upon them with satisfaction, as they writhe in horrible sufferings and eternal flames. Satan knew that if this error should be received, God would be dreaded and hated by very many, instead of being loved and admired; and that many would be led to believe that the threatenings of God's word would not be literally fulfilled; for it would be against his character of benevolence and love, to plunge beings whom he had created into eternal torments. Satan has led them to another extreme, to entirely overlook the justice of God, and the

threatenings in his Word, and represent him as being all mercy, and that not one will perish, but all, both saint and sinner, will at last be saved in his kingdom. In consequence of the popular error of the immortality of the soul, and endless misery, Satan takes advantage of another class, and leads them on to regard the Bible as an uninspired book. They think it teaches many good things; but they cannot rely upon it and love it; because they have been taught that it declares the doctrine of eternal misery.

Satan takes advantage of still another class, and leads them still further to deny the existence of God. They can see no consistency in the character of the God of the Bible, if he will torment a portion of the human family to all eternity in horrible tortures; and they deny the Bible and its Author, and regard death as an eternal sleep. Then Satan leads another class who are fearful and timid to commit sin; and after they have sinned, he holds up before them that the wages of sin is (not death, but) an eternal life in horrible torments, to be endured through the endless ages of eternity. Satan improves the opportunity, and magnifies before their feeble minds the horrors of an endless hell, and takes charge of their minds, and they lose their reason. Then Satan and his angels exult, and the infidel and atheist join in casting reproach upon Christianity. They regard these evil consequences of the reception of popular heresy, as the natural results of believing in the Bible and its Author. {1SG 114-6}

Fire comes down from God out of heaven. The earth is broken up. The weapons concealed in its depths are drawn forth. Devouring flames burst from every yawning chasm. The very rocks are on fire. The day has come that shall burn as an oven. The elements melt with fervent heat, the earth also, and the works that are therein are burned up. The earth's surface seems one molten mass--a vast, seething lake of fire. Satan and all who have joined him in rebellion will be cut off. Sin and sinners will perish, root and branch (Mal. 4:1)--Satan the root, and his followers the branches. . . . "They shall be as though they had not been." Obadiah 16. {FLB 357}

The wicked receive their recompense in the earth. Proverbs 11:31. They "shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts." Malachi 4:1. Some are destroyed as in a moment, while others suffer many days. All are punished "according to their deeds." The sins of the righteous having been transferred to Satan, he is made to suffer not only for his own rebellion, but for all the sins which he has caused God's people to commit. His punishment is to be far greater than that of those whom he has deceived. After all have perished who fell by his deceptions, he is still to live and suffer on. In the cleansing flames the wicked are at last destroyed, root and branch--Satan the root, his followers the branches. The full penalty of the law has been visited; the demands of justice have been met; and heaven and earth, beholding, declare the righteousness of Jehovah. {GC 673}

When God finally purifies the earth, it will appear like a boundless lake of fire. As God preserved the ark amid the commotions of the flood, because it contained eight righteous persons, he will preserve the New Jerusalem, containing the faithful of all ages, from righteous Abel down to the last saint which lived. Although the whole earth, with the exception of that portion where the city rests, will be wrapped in a sea of liquid fire, yet the city is preserved as was the ark, by a miracle of Almighty power. It stands unharmed amid the devouring elements. {3SG 87-8}

I had been taught to believe in an eternally burning hell, and the horrifying thought was ever before me that my sins were too great to be forgiven, and that I should be forever lost. The frightful descriptions that I had heard of souls lost in perdition sank deep into my mind. Ministers in the pulpit drew vivid pictures of the condition of the damned. They taught that God never proposed to save any but the sanctified. The eye of God was upon us always; every sin was registered and would meet its just punishment. God himself

was keeping the books with the exactitude of infinite wisdom, and every sin we committed was faithfully recorded against us... Our heavenly father was presented before my mind as a tyrant, who delighted in the agonies of the condemned; not the tender, pitying Friend of sinners who loves his creatures with a love past all understanding, and desires them to be saved in his kingdom. {LS80 152}

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