

# The Biblical Doctrine of Hell Examined

[Brian Schwertley](#)

The doctrine of eternal punishment is probably the most unpopular, hated and feared teaching in the entire Bible. The thought of people burning in hell for eternity is most repugnant to the human mind. “It is a doctrine which the natural heart revolts from and struggles against, and to which it submits only under stress of authority. The church believes the doctrine because it must believe it, or renounce faith in the Bible, and give up all the hopes founded upon its promises.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet in spite of the terrifying nature of the doctrine, and in spite of the fact that people find the idea of everlasting torment revolting, the strongest support of the doctrine comes from the lips of Jesus Christ. Think of it: the most terrifying imagery and detailed descriptions of hell are found in the discourses of the Redeemer! Jesus continually warned men and women of the danger of going to hell. Jesus Christ, who foretold that He would come again to judge the entire human race, spoke more about hell and its terrors than the prophets and apostles combined did. To ignore and disregard the clear teaching of Jesus is to deny Christ.

Before the day of judgment, which will occur at the end of human history, those who die who do not believe in Jesus Christ will immediately go to hell. The soul is separated from the body at death and cast into hell. This fact is clearly illustrated in the account of the rich man and Lazarus: “The rich man...died, and was buried; and in hell he [lifted] up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom” (Lk. 16:22-23 KJV<sup>2</sup>). On the final day of human history, everyone who ever lived and died will be resurrected and judged by Jesus Christ. “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:11-15).

Before the last judgment, the souls of those who died without Christ suffer in hell without their physical bodies. Their physical bodies are rotting in the earth. “For dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). Immediately before the final judgment both soul and body are reunited during the resurrection of the dead. “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth; those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (Jn. 5:28-29). Then both body and soul “shall be cast out from the favorable presence of God, and the glorious fellowship with Christ, His saints, and all His holy angels, into hell, to be punished with unspeakable torments, both of body and soul, with the devil and his angels forever.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York, 1871), 3:870.

<sup>2</sup> All Scriptures New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, answer to question 89.

Some theologians and commentators believe that “the lake of fire” into which unbelievers, Satan and his demons are dumped after the final judgment is a different and worse place than hell. Those who hold this position view hell (hades) as a prison or holding pit for the wicked until the resurrection; then after the final judgment the wicked go to the lake of fire. Others teach that the wicked will be in the same place before and after the resurrection, that place being hell. Before the resurrection the damned suffer without the physical body and after the resurrection both body and soul suffer torment together. Both views are in total agreement that hell is a literal place created by God for the devil and his angels. All orthodox, Bible believing theologians and commentators agree that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ will suffer everlasting, eternal torment. Therefore the imagery, terms and descriptions given to us by Jesus Christ, the prophets, and the apostles regarding God’s retribution against the wicked, apply equally to both views.

## The Bottomless Pit

In modern society violent criminals are kept in prison because they are a danger and menace to society. Those who are in prison are unfit to live with law-abiding citizens. Hell was created by God for those who are unfit to dwell in His presence. “God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment” (2 Pet. 2:4). “The angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own habitation, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day” (Jude 6). Hell is an eternal prison of darkness for the angels who rebelled against God. It serves to separate the wicked from God, His people, and the holy angels. Hell is a pit of darkness for those who reject Jesus Christ and His gospel. “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (Jn. 3:36). Those who try to enter heaven on the basis of their own works-righteousness, rather than Christ’s perfect righteousness, will go to hell (Mt. 22:11-14).

What kind of prison is hell? Hell is called the “bottomless pit” (literally in Greek, “the pit of the abyss”). “And he opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace” (Rev. 9:2). Hell is a “pit of darkness.” The picture of hell that the Bible presents is not a clean, modern prison but rather a dark, subterranean dungeon. The word translated pit in the language of the New Testament [*phrear*] was also used to describe a well or cistern. The Bible presents hell as an immeasurably deep pit, very large on the bottom and possibly narrow at the top like a cistern. The book of Jude indicates that, at least for fallen angels, there may be individual holding pits in hell for isolation (v. 6). The prophet Isaiah reveals that the pit of hell may have side compartments: “Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit” (Isa. 14:15 KJV).

The designation “bottomless pit” may be more than just an indication of hell’s immense size; it may also point to the utter despair of those who are trapped in it. Who can escape that which is bottomless? Imagine the total despair the sinner will experience who is separated from God and His saints forever. Imagine the dread of sinking unendingly into the outer darkness. Oh what despair—without hope, going down, down into the darkness, forever!

## The Punishment of Sense

In hell the wicked suffer the punishment of sense. Those who are not saved by Jesus Christ will suffer eternal torment. “And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, ‘...I am tormented in this flame’” (Lk. 16:23-24). The Greek word for torment (*basanos*) often described hideous instruments of torture used in extracting information from prisoners. The word also depicted the severe pain caused by disease. When used of the torments of hell it is descriptive of the grievous pains of both body and soul in hell. “The master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two [lit., torture or severely scourge him] and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 24:50-51).

The Bible sets before us many differing aspects of the torments in hell as a warning. The torments of hell help us to understand how much God hates sin. These torments also help us to understand just how precious is the saving, cleansing blood of Jesus Christ: “You [Christians] were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Oh what dreadful torments await those who die without Christ!

## Eternal Destruction

Hell is a place of eternal destruction. “The Lord Jesus [shall be] revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Th. 1:7-9). Of those people who “set their minds on earthly things,” who therefore are “the enemies of the cross of Christ,” God warns that their “end is destruction” (Phil. 3:18-19). Unbelievers are “vessels of wrath made for destruction” (Rom. 9:22).

## Tophet

This eternal destruction is illustrated in many ways. One of the most terrifying is the designation Tophet or Gehenna. Tophet was a small valley south to southwest of Jerusalem which belonged to the sons of Hinnom. Tophet and Gehenna came to be designations of hell because of the terrible things which occurred there.

The wicked, unbelieving Jews of old would come to Tophet to sacrifice their children to the god Molech (Jer. 7:31).<sup>4</sup> At Tophet the idolatrous Jews placed a large, bronze statue of Molech, shaped like a man with outstretched arms and hands. A fire would be built within the statue. When the statue was red hot, the idol-worshippers would place their baby sons and daughters onto the outstretched, red-hot arms and hands. Their little infants would die the most

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<sup>4</sup> Some modern scholars believe Tophet refers to a large pit which contained a bonfire. As part of idolatrous rituals, infants would be tossed into the flames. A bonfire within a large pit is an appropriate symbol of the lake of fire, into which all who disobey the gospel of Jesus Christ will be cast.

painful, excruciating death imaginable: their skin would be seared off their bodies, their flesh would be roasted; they were burned alive.

The screams, cries and screeches of their own children's agony was unbearable, even to these wicked, debauched parents. Therefore, drums were played to drown out the hideous screams of the tortured infants. Hence Tophet, in the Hebrew, signifies the beating of drums.<sup>5</sup> Therefore Tophet is a perfect symbol of hell where "God takes His rebellious children, casts them into the fire, [and] puts them into the arms of destruction"<sup>6</sup> forever away from Christ and His saving blood. Will there be drums to drown out your screams when you sink into the flames of hell—you who reject Christ and His gospel?

Tophet became associated with judgment and slaughter in Judah's history. The armies of Babylon would come and slay so many people of Judah that there would be too many bodies to bury. Thousands upon thousands of bodies would lie in the open fields to be consumed by birds and animals. Tophet would be filled with the bloated, rotting bodies of rebellious Judah. "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "when it will no more be called Tophet, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Tophet until there is no room. The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. And no one will frighten them away" (Jer. 7:32-33). The historical Tophet and the gruesome events that occurred there are a foretaste of the destruction and torment of hell. God Almighty's proclamation of damnation against unbelieving, rebellious Judah will echo forth from the lips of Jesus Christ against all those who reject the gospel. "And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh" (Isa. 66:24).

By the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, Tophet (or Gehenna) had become a garbage dump for Jerusalem. Gehenna was also used to dispose of the dead bodies of criminals. Fires burned continuously to consume the garbage. The garbage and dead bodies were also consumed by worms (maggots). In the same way, hell is the ash heap—the garbage dump—of all human history.

Those who believe in Jesus Christ and repent of their sins go to heaven or paradise (Jn. 3:18; 6:35, 40; Lk. 23:43; 24:47). But those who refuse to repent and submit to Jesus Christ become eternal garbage. Without Christ's cleansing blood, sinners are polluted and unclean before God. Because of your sins, you are like a rotting corpse awaiting the fire of God. Jesus used the imagery of Gehenna to warn you to repent: "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched; where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched; where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire; where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt" (Mk. 9:43-49).

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<sup>5</sup> The etymology of the Hebrew word Tophet is uncertain. Some of the older commentators believe the word signifies a tabret or small drum used in ritual sacrifice. Many of the modern commentators think the word is related to the Aramaic word for "hearth" or "fireplace." Others believe it is derived from the Hebrew for "to spit," based on other related dialects. In any case, the horrifying nature of Tophet is clearly evident from what occurred there.

<sup>6</sup> James Webster, *Select Sermons* (Edinburgh, 1764), p. 13.

## Everlasting Fire

Hell is a place of eternal fire, a place where the fire is not quenched. “Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 13:40-42).

It is well known that those who die by burning to death suffer tremendous pain. Burning to death is a terrifying and excruciating experience. Throughout history, death by burning was reserved for only the most wicked of criminals. Yet the fire in hell is much worse than earthly fire. Earthly fire consumes the flesh of its victims. When the nerve endings are consumed, the pain ceases. But for those in hell, the pain will not cease, because the fire of hell does not consume. Rather than being consumed by it they are preserved to burn and suffer and be tormented on and on, forever and ever. “They are to be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever” (Rev. 14:10).

The flames of hell have the ability to torment the souls of men while their physical bodies are still in the grave before the resurrection. They also have the ability to torment the fallen spirit beings: Satan and his demons. Therefore the fire in hell is probably not a literal, earthly fire, for an earthly fire would not torment spiritual creatures. The fire of hell, whatever its nature, is much worse than an earthly fire. The fires on earth will someday burn out. The flaming sun and all the stars of the universe will someday spend their fuel. But the flames in hell will continue. “They will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). There will be no rest from the torment of the flame, because it burns “day and night forever and ever.”

## Outer Darkness

Hell is the place of outer darkness. “Cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 25:30). Outer darkness is a just punishment for those who hate the light. “And this is the condemnation, that the light [Jesus Christ] has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed” (Jn. 3:19-20).

Those who continue in sin and do not submit to Christ are the children of darkness (1 Th. 5:5). They are full of darkness and they dwell in darkness because they do not obey God’s Word (Ps. 107:10-11; cf. Mt. 6:3). The wicked walk in darkness (Ps. 82:5); therefore, they shall be “familiar with the terrors of thick darkness” in the pit of hell (Job 24:17). Imagine a darkness so dark and so thick that “it may be felt” (cf. Ex. 10:21). Hell is utter darkness. The Bible says it is “black darkness” (Jude 13). The wicked suffer torment in the flames of hell, yet they do so in total, black, terrifying darkness. “Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness, in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 22:13). In the outer darkness you will be alone with your thoughts. You will have eternity to dwell upon a life wasted serving your own foolish lusts and vanities rather than Jesus Christ. In the outer darkness “there is no light of comfort, no light of hope, no light of joy,”<sup>7</sup> no light of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

peace, no light of friendship and no fellowship with Jesus Christ who “is light, and in Him is no darkness at all” (Jn. 1:5). “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside are dogs [unbelievers] and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie” (Rev. 22:14-15).

## The Punishment of Loss

One aspect of the torment of hell is the punishment of loss. There is eternal separation from God—the fountain of all blessings—and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Those in hell are forever separated from perfect love and perfect light. Nothing that a human being can or will experience can compare to being in the presence of Jesus Christ in all His glory. The glorified saints in heaven shall look upon the One who suffered, died and rose for them. They shall dwell forever in His unsurpassable love. They shall cast their crowns of glory at His feet and worship Him (Rev. 4:10).

The wicked do not love or delight in Christ; therefore they may not fully comprehend what they are missing by being cast away from God’s presence. Yet one thing is clear: when unbelievers see Christians going into paradise, and themselves going into perdition, they will be filled with the torment of loss. They will suffer great sorrow, envy and anger when they see Christians exalted and themselves thrust out: “But He [Jesus Christ] will say, ‘I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.’ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out” (Lk. 13:27-28). Those very people that you considered to be fools, religious fanatics and unscientific morons will be vindicated and exalted before your eyes. “For the Scripture says, ‘whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame’” (Rom. 10:11).

Hell will also involve the loss of all the blessings that you once had upon the earth. Do you have a beautiful or handsome face? Do you have a well-toned body? When you die, your face and body will rot and be consumed by worms. After the resurrection and final judgment, your body will be cast into hell. When you walked upon the earth, people admired your beauty, but in hell you will weep and gnash your teeth because you used your body as an instrument of sin and lust rather than as an instrument of righteousness. “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4).

Do you have many possessions? Do you have a beautiful house and a fine car? What good will your possessions be to you when you die? “When he dies he will carry nothing away; His body will not descend after him” (Ps. 49:17). You will miss your house, car and various pleasantries as you sit and weep in the flame. “Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits” (Jas. 1:9-11).

Are you popular? Are you an accomplished business person, musician, poet, actor or artist? Your accomplishments and popularity will not help you when you die. God is not impressed by fame or popularity. God is not impressed by the charity of fornicating rock stars and adulterous movie stars. God will only accept those who believe in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved” (Jn. 10:9). You will not

be popular in hell. There will be no adoring crowds for you in hell. You will dwell in darkness, alone. You will have no friends, no companions, no family and no hope.

Are you a family person? Is your life centered around your family? Do you love and adore your children? If you do not believe in Jesus Christ and obey His Word, then you will die and go to hell and never see your loved ones ever again. You will be tormented day and night, knowing that your children will go to hell because you did not teach them about Christ; because you refused to take them to a Bible-believing church. Or you will suffer eternal pains of conscience because you indoctrinated your children in a false religion. “Then he [the rich man in hell] said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets [i.e. the Bible]; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’” (Lk. 16:27-31). Those who care about their families will long to go back to the earth to warn their loved ones to embrace Jesus Christ before it is too late. But they cannot go back. They are imprisoned in the pit forever.

Is your philosophy of life to have as much fun as possible before you die? Do you love entertainment? Do you love to go out on the town? Do you love to travel and go to fancy restaurants? Are you a “lover of pleasure rather than a lover of God” (2 Tim. 3:4), “whose god is [your] belly” (Phil. 3:19)? You will suffer the torment of the punishment of loss. Hell is not for picnics, dinner parties and fun and games, but for torment. There will be no pleasures for you in hell: no vacations, no walks on the beach, no nights on the town, no picnics, no swimming pools, no water skiing, no concerts, no plays, no sporting events, no television, no sunsets, no flowers, no cruises to the Caribbean. But instead, hell will give you fire, darkness, torment, and weeping and gnashing of teeth. “And when He [Jesus] had called the people to Him, with His disciples also, He said to them, ‘Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels’” (Mk. 8:34-38).

## Everlasting Punishment

The most terrifying aspect of the torment in hell is that it never ends. It goes on forever and ever. The words used by Christ and the apostles to describe the duration of the suffering in hell clearly, unambiguously and unequivocally teach that the punishment in hell is eternal, unending and everlasting.

Jesus Christ describes the suffering in hell as: “everlasting punishment” (Mt. 25:46); “everlasting fire” (Mt. 18:8); “the fire that will never be quenched” (Mk. 9:45); “the worm that never dies” (Mk. 9:46). The apostles totally agree with Christ when they describe hell as: “a flaming fire” (2 Th. 1:8); “everlasting chains” (Jude 6); “eternal fire” (Jude 7); “the blackness of darkness forever” (Jude 13); “the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever” (Rev. 14:11; 19:3); “the lake of fire and brimstone, in which the devil, the beast, and the false prophet ‘shall be tormented day and night, forever and ever’” (Rev. 20:10).

If Jesus Christ and the apostles had intended to teach that hell is temporary, or that hell somehow represents the annihilation of the body and soul, then they no doubt would have used different images. Jesus Christ is God and cannot lie. The apostles were guided by the Holy Spirit when they wrote the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16); therefore, the Bible is infallible and without error in everything it teaches—even those doctrines that you don't like. If you reject Jesus Christ's warnings regarding the eternal torment of unbelievers in hell, then you will go to hell for calling the sinless Son of God a liar.

The noted American preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) gave this warning regarding the everlasting nature of hell's torments: "Imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven, or a great furnace, where your pain would be much greater than that occasioned by accidentally touching a coal of fire, as the heat is greater. Imagine also that your body was to lie there for a quarter of an hour, full of fire, and all the while full of quick sense; what horror would you feel at the entrance of such a furnace! And how long would that quarter of an hour seem to you! And after you had endured it for one minute, how overbearing it would be to you to think that you had to endure the other fourteen! But what would be the effect on your soul, if you knew you must lie there enduring that torment to the full for twenty-four hours! And how much greater would be the effect, if you knew you must endure it for a whole year; and how vastly greater still, if you knew you must endure it for a thousand years! Oh then, how would your hearts sink, if you knew that you must bear it forever and ever! That there would be no end! That after millions of millions of ages, your torment would be no nearer to an end, and that you never, never should be delivered! But your torment in hell will be immensely greater than this illustration represents."<sup>8</sup>

Jesus Christ not only clearly taught that the torment of hell would never end, but also presupposed eternal punishment in many of His other teachings. Speaking of Judas Iscariot, Jesus said, "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born" (Mt. 26:24). If hell or the lake of fire represented annihilation, then Jesus could not have made such a statement. Why? Because annihilation, from the standpoint of the one being annihilated, would be the same as never being born. Annihilation means the total destruction of both body and soul. It means the total cessation of existence. If you no longer exist then for you whether or not you existed and lived a life sometime in the past is irrelevant. The nothingness of never being born and the nothingness of being annihilated are both the same. Christ is saying that it would have been better to have never been created or born (to have never even existed), than to be created, and sin and then spend eternity suffering torment.

Jesus taught that there will be different degrees of punishment in hell. Those people who know God's will and do not obey it will receive "many stripes," but those people who are without God's Word and disobey ignorantly "shall be beaten with few" (Lk. 12:47-48). Jesus taught that the people who lived in the cities where He preached and did many miracles would receive greater judgment than those living in cities where no mighty works were done (e.g., Tyre, Sidon, and even Sodom—cf. Mt. 11:20-24). In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught that some sins are deserving of greater judgment than others (Mt. 5:21-22). The Bible clearly teaches that everyone will receive the punishment that they deserve. Adolf Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot will receive far greater punishment than the unbelieving, drunken, fornicating plumber. "The dead were judged every one of them according to their deeds" (Rev. 20:13). *The fact that there are*

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Future Punishment of the Wicked Unavoidable and Intolerable" in *Works* (New York, 1834), 2:81.

*various degrees of punishment in hell proves that annihilation will not occur. If everyone was annihilated, their punishment would be the same.*

The Bible says that those in hell will “have no rest day or night, and the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever” (Rev. 14:11). People in hell never rest; they suffer day and night. But annihilation is a state of rest. Those who do not exist do not suffer at all. Why do some people commit suicide? Because they mistakenly believe that death will bring them rest from life’s pain, troubles and torments. But they are wrong. They shall have no rest. Rest and peace can only be obtained through faith in Jesus Christ, not by a bullet, needle or overdose of pills.

Some people believe that it would be unfair for God to send people to hell forever for a finite number of sins committed while alive on earth. But these people fail to understand the true nature of the human heart apart from God’s saving grace. The unbeliever’s hatred of God, hatred of man, wicked thoughts and unbridled lust will go to hell with him. Because his enmity toward God never ceases and because his sinning never ceases, his punishment cannot cease. “All their lusts and corruptions go to hell with them [and] heightens the torment of hell.... It is but a mad notion to say [that] they do not sin in hell, which is its native soil. Sins and lusts, in their full rage, will be a very considerable ingredient in the torment of the damned. We see now, that contrary passions in the breast of a man and contrary lusts, like jarring elements, make a great storm there; how much more dreadful work, when all lusts are turned loose.”<sup>9</sup>

## Retribution

Hell is a place of divine retribution, not a place of rehabilitation. When God chastises a Christian, He does it for the Christian’s sanctification (moral improvement) and benefit (Heb. 11:6-7). But punishment in hell is pure retribution against breakers of God’s law. Christians are “in Christ” and adopted into God’s own family (Gal. 4:5, Eph. 1:5). The retribution that the Christian deserves for his sins was placed upon Jesus Christ on the cross (cf. Rom. 5:8-10). Jesus Christ received the full penalty, retribution and wrath against sin in His own body for those who believe in Him. *Christians stay out of hell and go to heaven solely because of what Jesus Christ has done for them.* “A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.... Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Gal. 2:16, 3:13). If you do not believe in Jesus Christ, then the cup of God’s wrath is poured out on you eternally in hell, rather than upon Jesus Christ on the cross.

If you die without believing in Christ, then your fate will be eternally sealed, because belief in Christ and the gospel must occur on earth before you die (Lk. 16:19-31; Jude 7, 13; 2 Pet. 2:4, 9). When you die apart from Christ, your guilt remains forever. “Suffering that is penal can never come to an end, because guilt is the reason for its infliction, and guilt once incurred never ceases to be. The lapse of time does not convert guilt into innocence.... The reason for retribution today is a reason forever.... But when, as the Supreme Judge, He [Jesus Christ] punishes rebellious and guilty subjects of His government, He causes an endless suffering. In this case, ‘their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched’ (Mk. 9:48).... Damnation means absolute and everlasting damnation. All suffering in the next life, therefore, of which the sufficient and justifying reason is guilt, must continue as long as the reason continues; and the

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<sup>9</sup> Webster, pp. 20-21.

reason is everlasting. If it be righteous today, in God's retributive justice, to smite the transgressor because he violated the law yesterday, it is righteous to do the same thing tomorrow, and the next day, and so on *ad infinitum*; because the state of the case *ad infinitum* remains unaltered. The guilt incurred yesterday is a standing and endless fact. What, therefore guilt legitimatizes this instant, it legitimatizes every instant, and forever."<sup>10</sup>

## Justice

The eternal aspect of hell reflects God's justice, honor and majesty. Every sin is ultimately directed against God. Every sin is a direct challenge to God's nature and authority. Every time you sin you are saying, "I will be my own god. I will determine for myself what is right and what is wrong. I refuse to submit to Jesus Christ and His Word." God, who is infinitely holy and pure, has an infinite hatred of sin. God must glorify His justice by eternally punishing the wicked. Sinners spit and cast contempt upon God's honor and majesty. On the day of judgment and throughout eternity God will glorify and exalt Himself by the eternal destruction of the ungodly. "The vindictive justice of God will appear strict, exact, awful, and terrible, and therefore glorious."<sup>11</sup> To sin against an infinite God merits eternal punishment.

## Wrath

Hell expresses God's wrath against sin. God created you and gave you life. Everything on earth is a gift from God: the air you breathe, the water you drink, your food, clothing, flowers, beauty, and so on. The most amazing thing that God has done is to send His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to dwell among filthy sinners. Although Jesus was sinless, perfect, kind and compassionate, He was treated like a dog. He was humiliated, tortured and crucified. God in Christ did all this to save undeserving, ungrateful sinners. "God demonstrates His own love toward us [believers], in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Rom. 5:8-9).

God has every right to be angry with those who are unthankful, who attribute God's wonderful universe to chance evolution. But it is the rejection of God's dear Son, Jesus Christ, that most kindles the fire of God's indignation. Woe unto you if you reject God's offer of forgiveness through the blood of Christ! Everyone who tramples the Son of God under foot as worthless, as a myth or fantasy, shall receive the full cup of God's wrath. "The wrath of God burns against them. Their damnation does not slumber. The pit is prepared. The fire is made ready. The furnace is now hot ready to receive them. The flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them.... Oh sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell."<sup>12</sup>

God has nothing but contempt, hatred and indignation for sinners who count the vanities and lusts of life as more important than Jesus Christ. "'Now I will rise,' says the LORD; 'Now I will be exalted, now I will lift Myself up. You shall conceive chaff, you shall bring forth stubble;

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<sup>10</sup> William G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (New York, 1885), pp. 127-29.

<sup>11</sup> Edwards, "The Eternity of Hell Torments," *Works*, 1:87.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:89.

your breath, as fire, shall devour you. And the people shall be like the burnings of lime; like thorns cut up they shall be burned in the fire....' The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has seized the hypocrites: 'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?'" (Isa. 33:10-14).

God's anger against you increases every day that you live without Christ. Your sins multiply day after day. Every sin is recorded by God. God's wrath against you continues to grow. You do not know when God's patience and forbearance will run out. You do not know when you will be cut down and cast into the oven. "You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man" (Ps. 5:4-6). When God's patience runs out, you will be exposed to the fierceness of His unmitigated wrath. "I will tread them in Mine anger, and will trample them in my fury, and their blood shall be sprinkled upon My garments, and I will stain all My raiment" (Isa. 63:3). You will want to hide from the fury of the Lord. You will say "to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'" (Rev. 6:16)—but you will not escape.

Jesus Christ, whose life and blood you counted as unimportant, will crush you in the winepress of God's fierce wrath. "Now out of His [Christ's] mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (Rev. 19:15). Jesus Christ, who at His first coming came to die for sinners, will at His second coming pay back His enemies. "The Lord Jesus Christ shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord" (2 Th. 1:7-9).

## Salvation

God has revealed to you the terrifying nature of hell in order that you will turn to Jesus Christ. God's wrath is great, but it is not greater than God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. God has provided only one way to escape eternal torment and obtain eternal life. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (Jn. 14:6). If you believe in Jesus Christ and what He accomplished in His life, death and resurrection, then you will have eternal life. Only Christ's blood has the power to wash away sin. Christ experienced the full brunt of God's curse and wrath against sin on the cross in His own body so that those who believe in Him will not have to experience that wrath. Christ lived a sinless life to provide the perfect righteousness to enter heaven.

Jesus Christ's mission on earth was twofold. First, He had to live a perfect, sinless life. You and I are both sinners; we have failed to obey God's law. But Jesus Christ in His human nature was born without sin. He lived His whole life in perfect obedience to God's law. If you believe in Jesus Christ, His perfect obedience is imputed or credited to you. You are a sinner and deserve to go to hell, but if you trust in Christ you will be clothed with His perfect righteousness. On the day of judgment, when God looks upon all those who believe in Jesus Christ, He will see perfect obedience, perfect righteousness. It is solely on account of Christ's merits—His objective righteousness—that Christians gain entrance into heaven. Your supposed good deeds contribute nothing to your salvation.

Second, Jesus Christ had to die a bloody, sacrificial death for His people (the elect). Because of your sins you are guilty before God; the wrath of God rests upon you. You are an enemy of God and alienated from Him. You are in bondage to Satan, sin and death. But if you believe in Christ, your sin and guilt are placed upon Him on the cross. God's righteous wrath and indignation against your sin are appeased and set aside, because Christ bore the full penalty for your sin in your stead. The enmity and alienation from God caused by your rebellion against Him are fully absolved by Christ's death. If you believe in Jesus, you and God are no longer enemies but friends.

Christ restores our friendship and fellowship with God; He reconciles us to God. "For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Rom. 5:7-10).

Only the incarnate Son of God could provide the sinless, sacrificial death needed for sin's removal. And only the perfect, sinless life of Christ can provide the imputed righteousness needed so that God could be both just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus Christ. God did not overlook sin; He dealt with it head-on in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ rose from the dead, victorious over sin, Satan and death. If you believe in Him, His victory becomes your victory. "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.... Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed" (Rom. 10:9, 11).

## Your Obligation

If you have placed your trust in Jesus Christ, as He is revealed in the Scriptures, then you are completely justified before God and clothed with Christ's perfect righteousness. Although a person contributes *nothing* to his salvation, true believers show their love and gratitude toward Christ by obeying His revealed will. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (Jn. 14:15). True saving faith *always* issues forth unto a life of obedience (Mt. 7:16-20; Heb. 3:12-19; 4:2, 6; Jas. 2:14-20, 26; 1 Jn. 1:5-10); therefore, you should obey God by being baptized and becoming a member of Christ's church. It is absolutely vital to your spiritual growth that you use the means of grace: prayer, the Word and the sacraments in the public worship of God. Attend a church that obeys the Bible as God's inspired and infallible Word—a church that adheres not only to the early, historical creeds of the church (such as the Apostles Creed), but also to the confessions that arose out of the Protestant Reformation (such as the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession of Faith). Why? Because the Reformation (especially the Scottish Reformation) produced the most biblical churches on earth since the days of the apostles. Becoming a regular part of Christ's church is mandatory for the believer: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:25). Remember, Jesus warned you of the wrath to come and the eternal punishment of hell so that you would turn to Him. Believe in Christ now, before it is too late. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

This booklet is dedicated to the memory of

Dr. John H. Gerstner, 1914-1996

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