

Divine Judgment

The Christian teaching of divine judgment is that God will judge all sinners who have not repented and trusted in Jesus Christ. Instead of their judgment being taken by Jesus, it will remain their own for all eternity.

This proposition is very unpleasant to most Christians, and abhorrent to those who are not followers of Christ. It has caused some people to doubt the Bible or the God of the Bible, or to suggest doctrines such as conditional immortality or annihilationism, or even depart from the faith altogether.

Caution Against Over-Reaction

It is not unusual at all for people to struggle in this area of Christian teaching. Everyone has questions on this and other matters like the sovereignty of God and responsibility of man, or about creation and evolution, and the like. Questions such as these are not wrong—they are part of growing up into a mature understanding of the faith. But do not make a snap decision. Do not press the eject button to propel yourself away from the faith you have been taught. Recognize that you may have a “Sunday school” type of knowledge—and thus faith—where you have learned the basics but have not entered into the meat of God’s word. Sometimes people stay in that elementary state for a long time. Some, however, when they come of age and are capable of more mature thinking in their late teens and early twenties, enjoy digging in and dealing with the more difficult problems such as this one about eternal punishment.

If you are reading this and have struggled in your thoughts with the matter of eternal punishment, consider this wise advice: do not throw all of your beliefs in God and Christ out the window just yet. Sometimes, especially for young people who have less perspective on these matters due to a lack of experience, one or two YouTube videos can cause an over-reaction. Youthful zeal and impatience can bring one to deny eternal punishment because it does not seem to make logical or moral sense. Even apart from outside influences, intellectual pride can cause a person who has thought about the issues—but without a full set of data—to come into inner conflict.

The first reason that you should be patient is that you are not alone. Many people have struggled with this doctrine. Some professing Christians have come up with alternative explanations because it is so difficult to reconcile the lake of

fire with a loving and decent God—but they have not entirely departed from the faith.

The second reason to be patient is that no one can fully understand the ways of God. Even the most humble, knowledgeable and wise among the human race cannot fully understand God. His ways are indeed higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9). You are likely missing important data in order to properly evaluate the idea of eternal punishment. If you have not studied the Bible thoroughly on the issues of Hell and the cross-work of Christ in taking God’s wrath for sinners, then you are *certainly* missing important information that is necessary to inform your mind and conscience about this. Without that, you are not qualified to make pronouncements about the appropriateness of the eternal justice of God.

The third reason to be patient is that you can exercise faith in the God whom you have learned from the Bible is all-knowing, all-wise, love, holy, just, merciful, gracious, kind, and all-powerful. You have learned that God loved the world and gave His Son to die in your place, for your sin, to take your punishment. You know these things to be true, so you should be willing to trust God while you wait to learn more of His ways.

Caution Against Making Excuses

Sometimes doubts over any doctrine, including eternal punishment, arise because of a spiritual shortcoming in the person with the doubts. Said another way, such doubts can arise because of *sin*. What sin may be in your life that causes you to excuse unpleasant doctrines because they are hard to reconcile with where you are headed? Do you have pride? Do you struggle with sexual sin internally or externally manifested or both? Are you perpetually angry? Do you regularly lack gratitude toward God for the good gifts He has given you?

Any or all of these violations of God’s standard of righteousness prime you to make excuses like, “I do not believe in Hell anymore” or “there have to be multiple ways of salvation.” Your flesh is at war with your conscience, desperately trying to cover over bad feelings of guilt. The conflict causes all kinds of bad thinking and behavior.

Considering Objections to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment

First, someone may object to the extended time of punishment. How can God punish a man who sinned for 75 years with a punishment that lasts many more

years? **Second**, an objection may be raised about the nature of the punishment. The punishment is so severe as to be repulsive to civilized sensibilities.

Both objections can be addressed together using an illustration. If you smash your neighbor's *tomato plant* with a baseball bat, there may or may not be unpleasant consequences—the neighbor may yell at you, or call the police on you, or get a personal protection order. If you swing the baseball bat in a similar way against the neighbor's *cat* or *dog* and severely injure or kill it, you most certainly will face trouble with the law and may even see jail time. If you swing the baseball bat in the exact same way on the *neighbor* and kill him, you will go to jail for a very long time or even be given the death penalty. If in addition you exhibited ethnic hatred toward the neighbor as you victimized him with the bat, the law may add on further punishment because your wrongdoing was also a hate crime.

Notice that the same act—swinging the baseball bat—results in different levels of punishment. The same movement of the bat (“sin”) has different consequences depending on the victim. The principle is that the amount of trouble is proportionate to the type of victim that is injured or killed. A plant is less important than an animal, which is in turn far less important than a human being. It makes sense that more severe punishment is meted out depending on the type of victim. The magnitude of the offense is measured at least in part by the results of the offense.

That same pattern of thought applies when we consider sin against *God*. God is the ultimate victim, the highest possible object of one's wrongdoing. God is infinite. He is of a much higher sort than a mere person, just like a person is more valuable than an animal or a plant. The Bible says that sin is always against God (Psalm 51:4), even if there are other, more immediate victims.¹ The kind of punishment befitting one who commits a crime against *God* corresponds to God's perfect and infinite holiness.

A **third** objection raised against eternal punishment is that Jesus Christ paid the penalty of sin in a very short time—cannot that be the case with others? That

¹ Genesis 20:6, 39:9; Exodus 10:16; Leviticus 4:22; Deuteronomy 1:41, 9:16, 20:18; Joshua 7:20; Judges 10:10; 1 Samuel 2:25; 2 Kings 17:7; Jeremiah 3:25, 8:14, 16:10-11, 51:5; Daniel 9:8, 11; Zephaniah 1:17. There are numerous other verses that use similar language.

is true only because Christ is the infinite God-man. A lesser being takes a much longer time to pay the debt of sin.

A **fourth** objection is that there must be another way than Hell. But the Bible does not suggest such a possibility and is quite clear in its teaching of the opposite. The nature of the sinful person is that they naturally tend to continue in that path (2 Peter 2:14—never ceasing from sin). Heaven is not a place for such people (Revelation 21:27). There is “no hope” for the unsaved who have died (1 Thess. 4:13). Thus, there is no post-mortem second chance revealed in Scripture.

A **fifth** objection is that the result of destruction means the end of existence for a person. See below about annihilation. Destruction does not indicate cessation here; it rather means ruination. The same is true for *perdition*, which is essentially synonymous with *destruction*.

A **sixth** objection is that God is the love, so He would not punish someone unendingly. This objection overstates one attribute of God in contrast to other important attributes in this matter: God’s holiness and justice.

Various Views of the Eternal State of the Sinner

1. Reincarnation. This is the view that a person will come back again in another life, either as another person or perhaps even as an animal (or plant?!). The Bible offers no such idea. Hebrews 9:27 indicates that people die once, and then are judged. They do not die twice or more times.

2. Universalism or Restoration. This belief is that all people will eventually be brought into favor with God. This is the case either because there are many ways to God (pluralism), or there is only the way of Christ but people can believe in him implicitly or unconsciously or through divine universal election. Or, others come to faith after they die. If there is such a place as purgatory or Hell, it will be emptied and all people will in the end exist in eternal bliss. This contradicts the Bible at Revelation 20:10, 15 and 14:9-11 and Matthew 25:41. This view extends a false promise of life to those who are evil, usually presumes upon God’s love without regard for His holiness and justice, and is based on human reason, not Biblical revelation. Human reason and associated intellect and conscience cannot stand on their own because they are thoroughly infected with sin.

3. Annihilation. This is the view that all people, or that impenitent people only, will ultimately disappear when they die. They simply cease to exist, going back to what it was like before they were conceived and born. Life is equated

with existence, and death with non-existence. The Bible does not teach this doctrine. See Luke 16:19-31 for one example. The Bible teaches that life is one state of existence, and death as another state of existence (not a cessation of existence). Life is when the body and spirit are together, and death is when the body and spirit are separated (James 2:26). Some understand that the sinner goes to a purgatory-like state, and then is annihilated. This makes the time in punishment temporary but gives two punishments for sin. Another view is that annihilation happens immediately at death for all people (atheists believe this). A serious problem with this view is that if Christ *died* for our sins, then He was annihilated. It seems to foreclose the possibility of resurrection. Scripture does not support this understanding, but it is the explanation of Seventh Day Adventists, evangelical Clark Pinnock, and John Stott.

Another serious problem with the doctrine of annihilation is simply that Jesus told us that He was going to raise *all* of the dead. If a person is annihilated, how are they then raised up? John 5:28-29—“Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (ESV). In Acts 24:15 Paul says that he holds “a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.” The apostle John writes of the coming resurrection of Christ’s people to reign with him, and then in Revelation 20:5 adds that “the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” The doctrine of annihilation conflicts with the plain teaching of bodily resurrection taught in Scripture.

Annihilation is a belief that comes from non-Christians. It has no place in the Christian community.

4. Eternal punishment. A plain reading of the Bible yields this understanding, namely that those who reject God and Christ are consigned to a place of punishment for eternity. They received good things in their earthly life, and then their consequences in the next phase of their existence. The Bible does not teach a doctrine of a post-mortem second chance or purging of sins by fire to atone for iniquity. There are obviously psychological difficulties accepting such a teaching, on grounds such as compassion, fairness, decency, civility or conscience. But this is unmistakably what the Bible says (see the next section).

The concept of immortality is important in the above discussion. Some believe that humans are **inherently immortal**, that is, that they will live in some state forever. Those who believe that way will opt for reincarnation, restoration, or everlasting punishment. Others believe that humans are **conditionally immortal**, meaning that if they are in God’s favor they will live forever, and if not, they will be annihilated. Yet others—atheists probably in the majority here—believe that humans are **mortal** and all will die and simply cease to exist, which is again the annihilation position.

The Basics of Eternal Punishment

Who? All those who have rejected God and Jesus Christ. Old-Testament-era believers in God will *not* go there, and New-Testament-era believers will *not* go there. Tribulation saints will *not* go there. Holy angels will *not* go there. We also believe that infants dying in infancy will *not* go there. Similarly, mentally incompetent people will *not* go there. The last two groups we hold with humble respect for the fact that the Biblical revelation is slim in these cases. Every other human being and (fallen) angel *will* go there (Revelation 20:15, 2 Peter 2:4).

Where? There are two places that are distinguished from one another. The first is Hades and the second is Hell or what is called the Lake of Fire. The first seems to be a temporary holding cell for the lost until the final judgment, at which time Death and Hades will give up their dead and those will stand before God and be judged. Any whose names are not found written in the book of Life will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. Hades is the county jail; Hell is the state penitentiary. They are essentially the same climate.

How long? For ever. Revelation 20:10 says that the devil, beast, and false prophet will be tormented in the lake of fire forever. There being no Scriptures that indicate an exit from this place, we understand accordingly that all who are placed there stay there forever. The following verses teach this eternal duration: Matthew 18:8, 25:41, 2 Thess. 1:9, Jude 13, Rev. 14:11, 19:3, 20:10. Note especially Matthew 25:46 where Jesus calls this place one of “eternal punishment.” Look at that verse in some detail:

Greek: καὶ ἀπελεύσονται οὗτοι
οἱ δὲ δίκαιοι

εἰς κόλασιν **αἰώνιον**,
εἰς ζωὴν **αἰώνιον**.

English: And these will go away

to punishment **eternal**,

But the righteous [will go away] to life **eternal**.

The parallel is undeniable: the Greek word αἰώνιον (eternal) is used of both punishment and life. The conclusion is that Hell is as *endless* a punishment as Heaven is an *endless* bliss.

We should also examine the word κόλασιν (punishment). It is only used twice in the New Testament. The BDAG lexicon defines it as “1. Infliction of suffering or pain in chastisement...2. Transcendent retribution, punishment.”

The adjective *eternal* is attached to the punishment, not just the place. We can imagine someone saying, “Yes, Hell is eternal, but the length of any particular person’s punishment there is *not* eternal.” But this verse indicates that the *punishment* is everlasting, not the place of punishment. Similarly, the *life* is everlasting, not the place of life, that is, Heaven. This is why the great difficulty in accepting the traditional belief of Christians regarding the Lake of Fire.

If punishment forever is too long, 1,000 years of punishment likewise seems too long. Yet the beast and false prophet, who are end-time human beings cast into the lake of fire in Revelation 19:20, are *still* in that place 1,000 years later according to Revelation 20:10. It seems that God is not shy about expressing the eternal length of punishment. He does not hide the fact in His word. This gives critics something to grasp and hold onto in their rejection of the things of God, but it is clearly what the Bible says.

Original design. The Lake of Fire was created for the Devil and his angels. The Lord Jesus explicitly says so in Matthew 25:41. God did not design Hell for sinful people. I take that to mean that they go there as a consequence not so much of God’s design but of their own choosing. There has to be some holding location for those who desire to rebel against God, and Hell is an appropriate place even though it was intended for the worst of the worst.

Nature of punishment. Is the punishment torture, like electric shocks or water boarding or the rack? Is it something like the boy tormented by a demon in Luke 9:39 or the fear of Saul in 1 Samuel 31:4? Or is it like those who were persecuted in Hebrews 11:35, or like the sting of scorpions in Revelation 9:5? Or, as the NET Bible translates in Revelation 14:9-11, is it torture with smoke rising up forever?

The Lord uses the word *Gehenna* to refer to the place of punishment by way of an analogy. That location was a physical location near Jerusalem (the valley of

Hinnom). It was also a place where Israel offered children in sacrifice to pagan idols (Jer. 7:31). Later, it was used as a garbage dump after Josiah desecrated it as a place for Molech worship (2 Kings 23:10). There, the fire never ceased (Mark 9:48). As such, it was a horrid place, a place where no one would want to go, filled with gross things and dangers.

The text of Scripture mentions other characteristics of the place of eternal punishment. **First**, it is a place of “outer darkness” which is an absence of light and perhaps of the moral or encouraging presence of God. God is omnipresent, so is not anywhere totally absent. **Second**, it is a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12). These physical expressions may well indicate a bodily existence in Hell (which I do believe is true), but more importantly they are expressions of grief and anger. The text does not tell us if this is anger against God or anger against one’s self, though gnashing of teeth is usually directed at a person other than the one whose teeth are doing the gnashing. **Third**, it is a place described as where a worm never dies. This does not have an obvious meaning, but could be the conscience of the unsaved bothering them forever, which would imply they are conscious. It could refer to the hopeless and despairing existence of one who has lost out on the blessings of God. **Fourth**, it is where there is an unending fire (Mark 9:48, Matthew 25:41). This is a quotation of Isaiah 66:24, the last verse of the prophet. There exist the bodies of those who transgressed against God, existing as if in the never-ending burn pile outside of Jerusalem. The first seems to be literal but not like common fire we are familiar with. **Fifth**, that text adds that it is an abhorrent place, a place that repulses the sensibilities of onlookers. **Sixth**, it is the second death. **Seventh**, it is a place of fire and brimstone (Revelation 21:8). **Eighth**, it is a place of eternal destruction away from the presence and glory of the Lord (2 Thess. 1:9). **Ninth**, it is a place of everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). **Tenth**, it is likened to a furnace (Matt. 13:42). **Eleventh**, it is like a prison and has chains (Matthew 5:25, Jude 6). **Finally**, it is a place worse than physical death because the Lord has power to cast someone into it *after* a person is dead (Luke 12:5). It is the place of eternal wrath against sin, which *is* the worst punishment that anyone other than Christ could suffer.

Another Greek word that is used to describe the torments of Hell is βασάνισαι (Matthew 8:6, 29, 14:24; Mark 5:7, 6:48; Luke 8:28, 2 Peter 2:8; Revelation 9:5, 11:10, 12:2, 14:10, 20:10). Matthew 8:6 records the *torment* of a man who is

paralyzed. We do not know for sure the exact nature of his sufferings beyond the paralysis. In Matthew 8:29, Mark 5:7, and Luke 8:28, the words are used by demons who are asking Jesus if He will *torment* them before the end time. In Matthew 14:24 and Mark 6:48, the word refers to the difficulties caused by large waves making the disciples' rowing work very difficult. Lot was *tormented* by hearing and seeing the evil of his neighbors (2 Peter 2:8). Locusts-like-scorpions will torment people on earth for five months during the Tribulation (Rev. 9:5). The two prophets will be blamed for *tormenting* others (11:10). The word refers to the struggles of giving birth (12:2). Anyone who worships the beast will be *tormented* with fire and brimstone in the presence of the angels and the Lamb (14:10). The devil, along with the beast and false prophet, will be *tormented* day and night forever (20:10). Once again, the everlasting nature of the torment is emphasized.

These descriptions are taken by some interpreters more literally, and by others more figuratively. I take the literal view. But others make a strong case for the metaphorical view.² Here is one reason for metaphorical interpretation: there is unending fire, but it is also dark, and this does not correspond to our usual understanding of fire. The literalist might respond that automotive racing fuel burns invisibly, as you may have observed occasionally over the years if you are a NASCAR racing fan. That kind of fire would allow for darkness *and* fire to exist simultaneously.

Others take the fire to be symbolic of *internal* torment of soul, not just external torment of body. This seems to ignore a passage like Luke 16:23-24 where the rich man in Hades describes his existence as tormented in flame. I imagine that there will be, at least in some residents of Hell, a burning regret and anguish over not responding to God's offer of the gospel.

² For example, William Crockett in his response to Walvoord, *Four Views on Hell*, p. 30-31 advocates the metaphorical view because the authors of Scripture did not intend for us to take their words about Hell completely literally, also that Hell has spirit beings in it not embodied ones, that Heaven and Hell are explained in symbolic pictures, and the words of Scripture portray a very awful existence in Hell which are meant as warnings. He sums up: "The final abode of the wicked was a place of profound sorrow, a place of ruin that words could never describe....the inexpressible judgment of God."

Hoyt takes the fire to refer to burning passions that cannot find expression in Hell.³

Whether the descriptions of Hell are literal or figurative, Scripture indicates the punishment for sin does have physical ramifications as well as spiritual (mental and emotional) consequences.

Are there levels of punishment in Hell? It certainly seems so. God will repay each person according to his works (Romans 2:6, Revelation 2:12-15). The plain meaning seems to include that worse deeds result in worse punishment. Yet the next two verses indicate two major outcomes: those who do not obey the truth will receive wrath while those who seek God's glory will receive eternal life (Romans 2:7-8). Jesus says that Tyre and Sidon will have a more tolerable day of judgment than Chorazin and Bethsaida, because they rejected the direct presence of Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:21-22). Luke 12:47-48 says that more or less punishment will be given out depending on how much of God's will was known by that person. More knowledge means more responsibility and a stricter judgment. Bottom line: the level of punishment depends on how much knowledge the person has, and how many sins they did.

The Rationale for Eternal Punishment

The teaching of eternal punishment in the Bible is very clear. Some people reject the doctrine for logical or intellectual reasons that are not found in Scripture. Or, they pit one feature found in Scripture (God's love and kindness) against another found in Scripture (eternal punishment) and conclude that one must be wrong. The one which will win out in such a battle is obvious. But there are a number of rational answers in line with Scripture that we can give to the rationalistic denier of divine punishment, as in the following paragraphs. They have to do with ethics, justice, and the like.

The duration and nature of punishment is not determined by the duration of the sin. An act of murder that took 2 minutes to complete is often punished by *life*

³ In his view, this is because residents of Hell have a bodiless existence and thus cannot carry out the desires of the flesh. I would be OK to modify his view so that the residents of Hell have a body (they are resurrected before they are judged, after all, Revelation 20:12) but have no ability to carry out the desires of their flesh because they are constrained from doing so in their eternal prison.

in prison. One of the reasons for eternal punishment then is that nature and results of the sin is factored into the equation of justice.

The duration and nature of punishment is also determined by the person sinned against. That person is always God, if not other beings as well. The higher the class of victim, the worse the punishment (example: plant, pet, person). God is infinite; His holiness is infinite; punishment for sin against Him is infinite.

The desire of at least some unsaved people is to have nothing to do with God, ever, forever. Because Hell is a place separated from the presence of God, it is a perfect place for those people for that purpose. If you had a job that you hated, or you had to live with people that you could not stand, you would know what it would be like for someone who hates God to be in heaven for eternity.

Eternal punishment is theologically a *necessary consequent* to the perfect holiness of God. Sin is a violation of God's utter and absolute holiness. There are things God *cannot* do, and one of those is to violate His own holiness and justice. Sin *must* be punished. And since it is of infinite demerit, He has ordained it also to take infinite duration to match the infiniteness of the offense and thus make a suitable punishment.

The awful nature of eternal punishment serves to wake up the lost. It is so terrible that anyone should want to avoid it at all costs. Thus, the open teaching of it by the Bible and by Christian teachers should raise alarm bells for all who hear. Therefore the plainly taught doctrine of Hell is a mercy from the Lord. It is not that God tells us an exaggerated story about Hell just to wake us up. Rather, He tells the *truth* of it to wake us up. If there were no truth to it, then it would not serve as a good wake-up call because people could just blow it off.

It is no surprise that God sends the Devil and his angels to hell. It is only a small step from there to understand how it is right that God sends very wicked humans there as well, like Adolf Hitler. And then again it is not a large step from there to see how it is reasonable for God to send all sinners there.

God could save everyone if He chose to do so, but that would not leave much room for free moral agency, or what is more commonly called free will. God has granted each person the "space" to not believe in Christ, and many people "take advantage of" that space by staying in that state. They find it comfortable in this life. Yet God has published far and wide the consequences for such a decision. He does not make anyone believe, as if He were to twist their arm and compel belief.

Another rationale for eternal punishment is this: what provably better option is there? You might say, “There has to be a better option.” But the very definition of God, including His wisdom and knowledge, means that God is able to figure out the best option. God’s power means that He can accomplish the ideas that He comes up with. It seems to me that the way things are explained in the Bible *is that better option*. There is no better way, else God would have chosen it. We may not fully understand His reasoning, but He must have excellent reasons for choosing the way that He did (Isaiah 55:8-9). The fact that we cannot figure those out gives evidence of our finiteness and our sinfulness.

Could not God permit people forever to decide to follow Him? Evidently that is not the case, because that is not what we see in this limited life we live. He gives a deadline, expecting that the task of deciding to follow Jesus or not can be accomplished in the typical lifetime. Any more time than that is not necessary and is superfluous.

Hell is not the worst suffering that anyone could endure. Jesus Christ endured the worst suffering there is, under the wrath of God, sufficient for the sins of every human who has ever lived in this world. You might object that the suffering was for a limited duration—indeed, but He suffered *all* of the penalty of sin. Sinners in Hell never actually experience that extent of suffering because they never finish it. Jesus did.

Shedd writes that if you believe that the just God exists, that mankind has freewill, and that sin is voluntary, you have enough to defend endless punishment of the unbeliever.⁴ He raises the following factors, to which I have added some explanation:

1. Sin is done voluntarily. It is done so in light of the universal knowledge of God which includes that offenders are worthy of punishment (Romans 1:19-20, 32). God cannot be blamed for this situation—sin is purely the work of the sinner.
2. Punishment is not calamity nor chastisement (for reformation). It is retribution. All three of those things glorify God in their own way, but only the last satisfies divine justice. Some punishments have a good consequence such as deterrence to others or improvement of the sinner

⁴ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 911. The next few paragraphs will offer some of Shedd’s thinking on this matter.

or protection of civil order. Final punishment does not seem to have the improvement motif whatsoever. But it should indeed have a deterrent effect—driving people away from it toward the gospel—and thus hopefully a restraining effect on sin that will protect the civil order.

3. Final punishment must be endless because the reason for the punishment never ceases to exist. The guilt of sin always remains and cannot be erased—other than through the gospel of Jesus Christ Who took the guilt for repentant sinners to Himself. No length of time turns guilt into innocence. People in Hell for one hundred years are guilty of transgressing against God, and after one thousand years and ten thousand years their condition is the same. There is no statute of limitations.
4. Furthermore, guilt cannot be sub-divided into pieces in such a way that each piece is “paid for” in a certain amount of time. Guilt is an indivisible thing. And guilt against an infinite God is infinite guilt.
5. God is not wrong to exact justice. Romans 12:19 says that vengeance belongs to God. Romans 3:5-6 says “Is God unrighteous who takes vengeance?” The answer to this rhetorical question is, “No, God is not unrighteous. In fact, He is righteous to do so.”
6. Human punishments are a finite approximation of the divine perfect exaction of justice. And those punishments typically consider the finite side of the effect of sin—a person hurt or property taken or the like. They consider some part of the guilt of the sin. But God’s vengeance takes into account more, including the impact on God’s infinite justice, its effect upon the entire society present and future, and the full scope of guilt.
7. The human conscience knows that punishment is right. Self-love and a desire for happiness are the shields that people use to block the conscience from its proper operation. People’s dread of Hell is proof that people grasp the unending nature of punishment for sin. The fact that people still labor to try to disprove its existence is proof *of* its existence. No one works so hard to prove the non-existence of a unicorn, for example.
8. The will of the sinner is in bondage to sin and continues down that path. In fact, the will of the sinner is increased in anger against God when he

receives his due reward. This is another rationale for endless punishment.

9. At least some of the wicked prefer Hell to Heaven. They do not want to be where God is, where pure goodness is. Heaven would be Hell to them. Hell is in some sense preferable even though it is very bad. At least there, the sinful demon or soul can remain in its chosen state of pride and rebellion against God. John 3:19—“men loved darkness rather than light.”

[For September 4 #7 above down, and red section above on annihilation and below]

Perhaps the strongest support for the doctrine of eternal punishment is simply this: the teaching of Christ. Note, however, that the red letters of your Bible are not more inspired than the black-letter words. But Christ spoke very plainly of the doctrine and because of His perfect character, we know that he did not stretch the truth, for instance, simply to push people into believing in Him. Neither did He give false hope by weakening the teaching. He gives no clear statement that allows us to water down the teaching of eternal punishment. He and the apostles are clear and certain and they do not waffle on this matter. Jesus spoke of these things in perfect righteousness, love, and compassion. He was burdened for people’s souls—“if you do not repent, you will likewise perish” (Luke 13:3, 5; see also Matthew 23:37). Hell is not the creation of the church or some over-zealous religious nuts bent on controlling the populace. Christ taught it because it is the real destination of many who reject God. If we reject Jesus on this issue, it seems we would reject everything else that He says—things which we know to be true, reasonable, just, and good.

Furthermore, Jesus spoke of these matters as one with firsthand knowledge. Setting aside for a moment that He, with the Father, *created* the situation of eternal life and eternal punishment, we should keep in mind that Jesus was from above (John 3:31). He was from the “other world” and is an eyewitness to the things that go on there. In His divine consciousness as the Logos, He knows from firsthand experience things that no human being can know. He has seen the Devil; He knows Hades. Later on after He died, it seems He *went* to the underworld, as it is sometimes called, and proclaimed His victory (1 Peter 3:19).

Another reason to accept eternal punishment is this: without eternal punishment, the impetus for Christ’s ministry is gutted and means there was no

real reason for Him to come and suffer such an awful penalty for sin and sinners. Why would He *die* if there *is no penalty for sin*? Just let people go their way and then restore them later, or annihilate them, or whatever. Why go so far out of His way to rescue the lost if the rescue operation is not really necessary? As Randy Alcorn writes, “By denying Hell’s reality, we lower the stakes of redemption and minimize Christ’s work on the cross.”⁵

Another support for the doctrine of Hell is that in the face of clear Biblical teaching for it, the natural temptation is to water it down and make it easier to accept, sometimes by eliminating the teaching altogether (Isaiah 30:10). We expect humans to downplay the danger on this doctrine. This is a strange notion, however, since people do also have a tendency to magnify the dangers of other things in life so as to entertain their fearful side.

The Scriptures are equally clear on teaching the eternal existence of God, the eternal happiness of the saved, *and* the eternal punishment of the righteous. Logically, these three things must stand or fall together, if the Scripture is to be believed at all.

Hell is a place of punishment by means of wages due for the harm done (2 Peter 2:13). Judgment will be according to works. Awful criminals will receive awful punishment.

God loves the world of His creation more than any human being can love it. If someone claims to be more loving than God, more kind than God, more just than God, then we automatically recognize that person is proud. Jesus loved in such a way and to such an extent that He gave Himself fully for the salvation of the world. In effect, *no human need suffer eternal punishment for sin because Christ died to save them from it if only they believe.*⁶

Another rationale for eternal punishment is this: Without it, there is no justice. Some people have not received the appropriate “rewards” for their deeds in this life. Very bad people, for example, if they just died at a ripe old age and disappeared (annihilation), received no consequences for their awful behavior. Indeed, justice is not necessarily served *in this life*. But God guarantees that it is

⁵ Alcorn, *If God is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil*, location 5845 of 9279 (Kindle).

⁶ There are undoubtedly some counterexamples. For instance, Jesus called Judas Iscariot the son of destruction or perdition.

served in the next—or the sins are covered by the work of Christ to those who repent and believe in Him.

Eternal punishment may well be eternal simply because the nature of the sinner continues to sin as well—complaining, hating God, rebelling against God’s authority, etc. Evil does not correct itself and so ongoing sin would imply ongoing punishment.

When we think of the awfulness of eternal punishment, we are thinking of the person being punished (or ourselves in their shoes). But what about the person who was a victim of that sinner? What do *they* feel if the one who perpetrated great injustice upon them goes free? What about the person who was tortured for most of their lives in a mental hospital in China—strapped down, injected with drugs, brain fried? Or the person whose organs were stolen from them while they were yet alive? Or those beheaded for their faith? Or those put in concentration camps? What about those perpetrators of injustice—do they not get *anything*? Without eternal punishment, the criminal gets off the hook, and the victim is left holding a bag of air for all eternity.

There is no reason for eternal punishment except that man has sinned and retribution is thus required; God cannot be blamed for man the creature’s sin.

Finally, note that the rationale for eternal punishment is inscrutable in the final analysis. The Isaiah 28:21 speaks of God’s unusual, awesome and (in the KJV) *strange* work of punishment against His people.

Conclusion

Walvoord writes a fitting conclusion for us: “Eternal punishment is an unrelenting doctrine that faces every human being as the alternative to grace and salvation in Jesus Christ. As such, it is a spur to preaching the gospel, to witnessing for Christ, to praying for the unsaved, and to showing compassion on those who need to be snatched as brands from the burning.”⁷

Those who deny eternal punishment are being deceived like Eve was in the garden of Eden. The serpent told her in effect, “God is wrong, you will not surely die if you eat of the forbidden tree.” It is similar today: the Bible says there is such a thing as eternal punishment for sin, but the human sinful nature, the world, and the devil still try to convince people otherwise. They use human reason and

⁷ John Walvoord, “The Literal View” in *Four Views on Hell*, p. 28.

compassion, all too often leaving out God's Word and God's holiness in their thoughts. Has such a devilish thought captivated your thinking?

It is said that Charles Darwin turned away from God because of the teaching of everlasting punishment. The impetus for his evolutionary theory could be that it provides an explanation for a universe without a God. But coming up with an alternate explanation for reality does not change reality.

The reason that people change their belief on the matter of eternal punishment is *not* because of Scripture. It is because of feelings of revulsion, a sense of superior moral judgment, etc. It is not because of the Bible, for the Bible is clear on the matter. It comes down then to a question of authority: who is *your* authority? God's word or your word, or another person's word?

Is it possible that God is more serious about sin than we think, and our sin is worse than we think? In fact, it is more than possible. It is a reality—Psalm 7:11, Isaiah 59:2, and Romans 6:23. Grasping this reality will make Hell not seem so shocking.

If you are doubting God because of this matter, what would convince you? Are you *absolutely certain* that there is no punishment for your sin? Or have you turned a doubt about the legitimacy of eternal punishment into a certainty, and then an excuse, for you to set aside the truth God has revealed in Scripture?

“God should do something about Hell!” He did—at the cross. This is the mercy that overcomes Hell. This mercy is the great salvation of Christ which delivers from sin and death and Hell. God receives the genuinely penitent and rescues him from eternal punishment.

References

Randy Alcorn, *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil*, Kindle, The Crown Publishing Group. Note the chapter on Hell.

Lorraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology*.

Harry Buis. *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, P&R 1957. A very good book on the subject.

X William Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell*, Zondervan, 1996.

R. L. Dabney, *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*. 3 vols. Volume 1 has an article “The Popular Arguments Against Endless Punishment,” p. 654-669.

Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem*, New York: Harper Collins, 2008, p. 127. “When I fell away from my faith—not just in the Bible as God's inspired word,

but in Christ as the only way of salvation, and eventually from the view that Christ was himself divine, and beyond that from the view that there is an all-powerful God in charge of this world—I still wondered, deep down inside: could I have been right after all? What if I was right then but wrong now? Will I burn in hell forever? The fear of death gripped me for years, and there are still moments when I wake up at night in a cold sweat.” [Quoted in Alcorn, p. 322]

X Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*. He advocates for annihilationism and conditional immortality. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Fudge

X Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times*, p. 233-240.

X Rolland McCune. *Systematic Theology*. Word document, pp. 271-76.

James Orr, ISBE. Not sure what article. But 2. Annihilation says, “So far as the annihilation is supposed to take place at death, it is contradicted by the Scriptures which support the soul’s survival after death; so far as it is believed to take place after a longer or shorter period of conscious suffering (which is White’s theory), it involves its advocates in difficulties with their own interpretations of “death,” “destruction,” “perishing,” seeing that in Scripture this doom is uniformly represented as overtaking the ungodly at the day of judgment, and not at some indefinite period thereafter. The theory conflicts also with the idea of gradation of punishment, for which room has to be sought in the period of conscious suffering, and rests really on an unduly narrowed conception of the meaning of the Scriptural terms “life” and “death.” Life is not bare existence, nor is “death” necessarily extinction of being.”

Of the second probation view, he writes, “It is, besides apart from the dubious and limited support given to it by the passages on Christ’s preaching to “the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19.20), destitute of Scriptural support.

Regarding “1. Mystery of the Future,” Orr writes of eternity that it has “its undisclosed mysteries of which we here in time can frame no conception. The difficulties connected with the ultimate destinies of mankind are truly enormous, and no serious thinker will minimize them. Scripture does not warrant it in negative, any more than in positive, dogmatism; with its uniformly practical aim, it does not seek to satisfy an idle curiosity (cf Lk 13 23.24). Its language is bold, popular, figurative, intense; the essential idea is to be held fast, but what is said cannot be taken as a directory to all that is to transpire in the ages upon ages of an unending duration. God’s methods of dealing with sin in the eternities may prove to be as much above our present thoughts as His dealings now are with

men in grace. In His hands we must be content to leave it, only using such light as His immediate revelation [the Bible] yields.”

Rene Pache. *The Future Life*. On p. 295 he has a quote from Adolphe Monod, which is: “I did everything I could to avoid seeing eternal suffering in the Word of God, but I did not succeed in it...When I heard Jesus Christ declare that the wicked would go away into eternal punishment and the righteous into eternal life, and that therefore the sufferings of the one class would be eternal in the same sense that the felicity of the other would be,...I gave in; I bowed my head; I put my hand over my mouth; and I made myself believe in eternal suffering” (*Première Série de Sermons*, p. 391).

Clark Pinnock and Brown, *Theological Crossfire*, 226. “I was led to question the traditional belief in everlasting conscious torment because of moral revulsion and broader theological considerations, **not first of all on scriptural grounds**. It just does not make any sense to say that a God of love will torture people forever for sins done in the context of a finite life.” [Quoted in Alcorn, location 5852]. And this: “I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine. ... How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God.” [Clark Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Family Impenitent,” *Criswell Theological Review*, 4 (1990), 246–47, quoted in Alcorn, location 5904.] This is blasphemy against God.

William G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (Klock & Klock reprint, 1980). (Original: New York: Scribner, 1886. See p. 153 for a quote like the one of Alcorn I referenced above.

David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott., *Essentials*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 314. “**Emotionally**, I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain. ... Scripture points in the direction of annihilation.”

X <https://www.gotquestions.org/why-does-God-send-people-to-hell.html>