

“What Happens To Those Who Die Apart From Christ? What Is The Biblical View Of Hell?”

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Introduction

What happens to those who die apart from Christ? Two contrasting views have emerged: Eternal Conscious Torment (ECT)—the historic Christian doctrine that the unrepentant will face everlasting, conscious punishment—and Annihilationism (or “Conditional Immortality”)—the view that the wicked will ultimately be destroyed and cease to exist rather than suffer eternally. This booklet explores the biblical evidence for eternal conscious punishment (a term some prefer because “torment” sounds arbitrary or unjust), clarifies key biblical terms often misunderstood in modern debates (Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, Tartarus), examines systematic theological implications (God’s justice, the nature of sin, the resurrection of the wicked, and the immortality of the soul), surveys historical theology from the early church through the Reformers and Puritans, refutes annihilationism’s claims (as promoted by figures like Edward Fudge and John Stott), addresses universalism, and considers pastoral and practical implications for evangelism, worship, and Christian living. The goal is to present a robust yet accessible defense of the historic view of hell.

Biblical Arguments For Eternal Conscious Punishment

Scripture provides clear and sobering testimony that the punishment of the wicked is conscious, eternal, and irreversible. Jesus and the New Testament authors speak of hell using emphatic language: unquenchable fire, undying worms, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, eternal punishment, and “no rest day or night.” Below we examine key passages (among many) that establish the eternity and consciousness of hell’s torments.

“Eternal Punishment” – Matthew 25:46

Jesus concludes the Parable of the Sheep and Goats by declaring, “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same Greek word *aiōnios* (“eternal”) describes both the fate of the wicked and the reward of the righteous in parallel phrases. It would be

absurd to interpret one as unending and the other as temporary, as St. Augustine observed, “if both heaven and hell are ‘eternal,’ either both are to be taken as long-lasting but finite, or both as endless... because the eternal life of the saints will be endless, the eternal punishment also... will assuredly have no end.”¹ Christ’s deliberate contrast makes the meaning unmistakable: hell’s punishment endures as everlastingly as heaven’s life. No plain reader of Scripture questions the eternity of heaven’s joy; by the same token, we must affirm the eternity of hell’s judgment. The phrase “eternal punishment” (Greek *kolasin aiōnion*) indicates a never-ending penal recompense, not merely the lasting result of annihilation. Indeed, Matthew 25:46 pairs punishment and life—concrete experiences—both as eternal in duration. Thus, if one denies eternal punishment, by the same logic one would undercut the promise of eternal life. The plain reading of Jesus’ words upholds conscious, unending punishment for the wicked.

“No Rest, Day Or Night” – Revelation 14:9-11

The Book of Revelation vividly portrays the fate of God’s enemies. Those who worship the beast “will drink the wine of God’s wrath... and will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.” This graphic image speaks of unceasing conscious anguish: “no rest, day or night” means no relief or pause in suffering. The rising smoke “forever and ever” (Greek *eis aiōnas aiōnōn*, “unto the ages of ages”) echoes the language of unending worship in heaven (Revelation 5:13)—a deliberate parallel indicating that the punishment of hell is as everlasting as the bliss of heaven. Importantly, this passage refutes any notion that the damned simply pass out of existence. Nonexistence would mean no consciousness and thus no torment—yet John describes endless torment and ‘no rest’ in hell. In fact, Revelation later applies the same phrase “tormented day and night forever and ever” to the devil, beast, and false prophet in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10), then notes that all the wicked share the same fate in that lake of fire (Revelation 20:14-15). Scripture thus forces the conclusion that hell is a state of perpetual conscious suffering. As terrifying as this

¹ [Augustine, *The City of God*, 1001-2 \(21.23\)](#)

prospect is, the Bible presents it as the just destiny of God's incorrigible enemies.

"Everlasting Contempt" – Daniel 12:2

The Old Testament also affirms eternal destinies for both righteous and wicked. "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." This verse, written centuries before Christ, anticipates the general resurrection and final judgment. Notably, both groups "shall awake"—implying continued existence after resurrection—but to radically different outcomes. The parallel terms "everlasting life" versus "everlasting contempt" again suggest equal duration. "Everlasting contempt" implies the wicked continue to exist as objects of contempt—a state of ignominy that never ends. If the wicked were annihilated into non-being, they could not experience "shame," nor could they remain the object of "contempt" eternally, since one cannot be held in contempt if one no longer exists. The plain sense is that the wicked face ongoing disgrace and abhorrence, likely from the perspective of the righteous and holy angels in eternity, while enduring the just consequences of their sin. Jesus alludes to this verse when He speaks of the resurrection of "those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29)—as opposed to the resurrection of life for believers. Both destinies are everlasting. God's final judgment will not be a momentary flash of punishment and oblivion, but an eternal state corresponding to one's spiritual condition: endless life for the redeemed, endless shame for the condemned.

Other Biblical Evidence

The above passages are among the clearest, but many other scriptures reinforce the doctrine of eternal conscious torment.

- Jesus' warnings about hell include descriptions like "the unquenchable fire" and "their worm does not die" (Mark 9:43-48), quoting Isaiah 66:24. An "unquenchable" fire is one that cannot be extinguished, it fully consumes what it burns, and the undying worm suggests an endless feeding on the dead—a gruesome metaphor indicating that the decay and misery of the wicked never reaches completion. Far from implying annihilation, "their worm does not die" portrays a perpetual

process of judgment. As one commentator noted, the worm that feeds on the corpse of the wicked is ever nourished, as the decay of their soul and situation never concludes.² In other words, the imagery points to punishment without end.

- Jesus also spoke of hell as “outer darkness” where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Weeping and gnashing teeth are conscious responses of extreme anguish and regret, which presuppose that the damned remain aware of their plight. The “outer darkness” suggests complete separation from God’s favor—an eternal exile from the joy of His presence (more on this below). This idea of banishment aligns with verses like 2 Thessalonians 1:9, which says the wicked “will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord.”³ Hell is to be shut out from God’s light and love forever.
- In a parable about the afterlife, Jesus depicted a rich man in Hades who is in torment and flame, conscious of his agony and pleading for relief (Luke 16:23-28). Though a parable, Jesus never hints that the rich man will cease to exist; instead the story soberly underscores the fixed gulf between comfort and torment after death, and the urgency of repentance before it’s too late. The rich man’s continued memory,

² Beyond (and crucially, after the writing of) Isaiah 66:24, there are numerous Second Temple Jewish traditional sources that confirm that Jesus properly understands “the worm does not die” as continuously feeding on the flesh of those in hell. Apocryphal sources: see [“Destroyed For Ever: An Examination of the Debates Concerning Annihilation and Conditional Immortality,”](#) by Tony Gray (gospelcoalition.org) re Judith 16:17 (where the “commentator” above is Ajith Fernando); also cf. 1 Enoch 27:2-3; 90:26-27; 103:7-8 (3rd-1st century BC; describes a fiery abyss prepared for sinners, ongoing shame and affliction, and eschatological punishment imagery developing Isaiah 66 themes); Sibylline Oracles 2:292-310 (2nd-1st century BC strata; portrays undying fire and divine wrath with irreversible punishment imagery consistent with Gehenna traditions); 4 Ezra 7:36-38; 7:84-87 (late 1st century AD; speaks of the “furnace of Gehenna,” conscious postmortem torment, and irreversible judgment marked by shame and suffering); 2 Baruch 44:12-15; 85:12-13 (late 1st century AD; contrasts the glory of the righteous with the fiery torment and enduring disgrace of the wicked); m. Eduyot 2:10; b. Rosh Hashanah 17a (early rabbinic traditions reflecting late Second Temple thought; discuss Gehenna as a place of punitive fire, in some strands including worm imagery and ongoing punishment for the truly wicked).

³ The 1689 2LBC cites 2 Thessalonians 1:9 in its description of such eternal banishment: <https://bit.ly/4kzQzVN>.

concern, and suffering in Hades contradict the notion that the lost simply perish like animals. They remain and feel the just consequences of a life without God.

- The apostle John's visions in Revelation include the great white throne judgment, where all the dead are judged and anyone not in the Book of Life is thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15). Importantly, Revelation 20:10 shows that the lake of fire involves ongoing torment ("tormented day and night forever") for the devil and his cohort. There is no indication that human beings thrown into that same fire (v.15) will experience anything less. Revelation 21:8 likewise calls this fate "the second death" for the wicked—a death even more dreadful than physical death because it is a final, spiritual death resulting in eternal separation from God's life. Yet, crucially, "death" here does not mean extinction of being (just as the "second death" is clearly not the end for the devil). Rather, it denotes a state of punishment and banishment from God—dying forever but never fully dead, always under the shadow of God's wrath.

An Excursus On Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, And Tartarus: Clarifying Terms Without Falling For Red Herring Deconstructionist Word-Studies

Before we weigh competing proposals about final judgment, we need to be clear about the Bible's own vocabulary—sheol, hades, gehenna, and tartarus—and avoid the common mistake of treating etymology or later associations as if they automatically determine meaning in a given passage. A common deconstruction argument claims that Christians built the doctrine of hell by flattening multiple biblical terms into one English word, "hell," and then importing later medieval or "Augustinian" fears back into Jesus. The argument usually runs like this: Sheol is merely the grave, Hades merely the underworld, Gehenna merely a literal valley outside Jerusalem, and Tartarus a mythic term for fallen angels. Therefore, the Bible does not teach a coherent doctrine of final, conscious, everlasting punishment. But this is a textbook example of the error of treating etymology as comprehensive exegesis.⁴ Scripture does not teach doctrine

⁴ See D. A. Carson's warning about the "root fallacy" and lexical errors in Exegetical Fallacies: [Don Carson Answers Questions About Hermeneutics and Introduces Exegetical](#)

by word origins alone, but by how words function in their literary, historical, and canonical contexts. Different words can overlap in reference, and the same reality can be described with multiple images and terms. The questions are not “how many different Hebrew and Greek words are there,” nor even “what does this word mean,” but “how do they function within the context” and “what do the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles actually teach about the final state of the wicked?”

Sheol

In the Old Testament, Sheol—a Hebrew word—is often the realm of the dead in general, spoken of with poetic flexibility, sometimes emphasizing the grave and sometimes emphasizing the shadowy condition of death under judgment.⁵ The Old Testament does not give a fully developed map of the intermediate state, but it does give the controlling trajectory: God will judge, the wicked will not finally escape, and resurrection leads to divergent everlasting destinies (Daniel 12:2). That is why it is mistaken to treat Sheol as though it can only mean “a hole in the ground,” as though the Old Testament has no category for divine judgment beyond death. Even within the Old Testament, death is more than biology; it is covenantal alienation and divine judgment (Genesis 2:17). So even where Sheol imagery is broad, it is situated within the Bible’s larger moral and eschatological storyline.

Hades

In the Greek Old Testament, Hades commonly renders the Hebrew Sheol, which already tells you something important: the Bible itself is willing to use different terms across languages to refer to overlapping realities without changing its moral theology.⁶ In the New Testament, Hades is used for the realm of the dead and is portrayed as a place of conscious anguish in Jesus’ teaching (Luke 16:23-28). Even if one insists that Luke 16 is a parable, Jesus is still using the imagery to teach real moral urgency and real post-mortem peril, and certainly not to reassure anyone that judgment

Fallacies” (gospelcoalition.org). These podcasts are examples comprehensively explained by his book *Exegetical Fallacies*.

⁵ “Dead,” *Encyclopedia of the Bible* (biblegateway.com)

⁶ “Hell,” *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* (biblegateway.com)

is an illusion. And crucially, in Revelation, Hades is temporary in the sense that it is not the final state: it “gives up the dead” and is itself thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:13-14). That is not a downgrade of judgment; it is the Bible distinguishing the intermediate condition from the final judgment.

Gehenna

It is true that Gehenna is a real place name derived from the Valley of Hinnom.⁷ But the argument often claims that because the valley was associated with idolatrous child sacrifice, and later (in some rabbinic traditions) with burning refuse, Jesus must have intended only the image of fire that consumes and is finished. Yet this move is historically tenuous and exegetically unstable. While the Valley of Hinnom was indeed associated with judgment in Israel’s history, the popular claim that it functioned as a perpetually burning municipal garbage dump in Jesus’ day lacks clear first-century textual or archaeological evidence and likely reflects later tradition.⁸ Treating that later imagery as determinative for Jesus’ meaning risks anachronism.⁹ More importantly, it misses how Jesus Himself frames the term. He is not simply invoking a municipal refuse site; rather, He clearly and explicitly links Gehenna language to “unquenchable fire” and “their worm does not die” (Mark 9:43-48) by drawing directly from Isaiah 66:24, which is already an eschatological picture of final judgment rather than an image drawn from civic sanitation. The fire in Isaiah is not described as briefly consuming and disappearing; it is unquenchable, and the worm does not die. The point is not that the imagery must be literal to be real; it is that the prophetic imagery conveys irreversible and dreadful judgment. Jesus intensifies Isaiah’s warning rather than domesticating it. A metaphor can be more frightening than a

⁷ [“Gehenna.” jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com); [“Fire.” Encyclopedia of the Bible \(biblegateway.com\)](http://www.biblegateway.com)

⁸ The oft-repeated claim that the Valley of Hinnom functioned as a perpetually burning garbage dump in Jesus’ day rests largely on later rabbinic and medieval Jewish tradition, especially as reflected in David Kimhi (12th-13th century), rather than clear first-century textual or archaeological evidence. See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew (NICNT)*, on Matthew 5:22; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew (NAC)*, on Matthew 5:22; and Craig A. Evans, “Gehenna,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (2nd ed.), who caution against making the dump theory determinative for Jesus’ meaning.

⁹ Making truth claims based on faulty chronological/historical order.

literal description precisely because it presses the moral and spiritual horror: God's wrath, irreversible loss, and utter ruin under judgment.

Tartarus

The New Testament uses this term for hell once (2 Peter 2:4), and it is explicitly about fallen angels being kept for judgment.¹⁰ That is not a reason to demote judgment; it is a reason to see that the apostolic witness includes categories of divine punishment and confinement awaiting final judgment, and it is comfortable using the vocabulary of its hearers without surrendering biblical meaning to pagan mythology. In other words, the Bible is not allergic to borrowing a term while redefining its theological content by context. That is why "Tartarus is Greek mythology" is not a valid argument.¹¹ Context, not origin, governs meaning.

Put simply, the Bible does not "collapse" all terms into one undifferentiated concept. It distinguishes the grave, the realm of the dead, the intermediate condition, and the final judgment. But far from weakening the doctrine of final punishment, those distinctions strengthen it by showing that Scripture has a coherent sequence: death, conscious accountability, resurrection, judgment, and an irreversible final state. That final state is described with the strongest language Scripture has for duration and experience: "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46), "no rest, day or night" (Revelation 14:11), and "tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). If someone argues, "Those words cannot mean what Christians have historically taken them to mean because other words exist," the response is straightforward: doctrine is not built on counting words—it is built on what the texts say in context. This is where the hermeneutical warning matters. Deconstruction treatments often commit the etymological fallacy by assuming a word's "original" or "literal" sense is its theological sense, and then they commit illegitimate totality transfer by importing everything a word can mean in some contexts into every context.¹² But Scripture's

¹⁰ See lexical note in the same Easton's overview: "["Hell," Easton's Bible Dictionary \(biblegateway.com\)](http://biblegateway.com)."

¹¹ Frankly, basically no reputable scholars take such argumentation seriously (unless they're trying to sell something.)

¹² See Moisés Silva on lexical semantics and word-study fallacies: ["Words and Their Meaning \(books.google.com\)](http://books.google.com).

own usage will not allow that. Jesus can use Gehenna imagery with Isaiah's undying worm, and John can speak of Hades being thrown into the lake of fire, and both can be true without contradiction. Different terms can mark different stages or angles on the same eschatological reality: God judges the wicked, and that judgment is conscious, dreadful, and everlasting.

Summary Of Biblical Teaching

Every New Testament author addresses the reality of final punishment.¹³ Across various genres—gospel, epistle, apocalyptic—the testimony is consistent: Hell is real, awful, and eternal. It is described as punishment (retributive justice from God),¹⁴ as destruction or death (ruin of one's well-being and all that makes life worthwhile),¹⁵ and as banishment or separation from God (being "left outside" the joy of His kingdom).¹⁶ These three motifs—punishment, destruction, banishment—do not contradict but complement one another, giving a multifaceted picture of hell's horror. Crucially, all three are eternal and conscious in nature.¹⁷ Hell's punishment is deserved and just—"the wages of sin" rightly paid (Romans 6:23). Its destructive effects are everlasting—a "second death" from which there is no resurrection or recovery. And its banishment is absolute—an exile from God's presence (the source of all goodness) that leaves the soul in utter darkness. In sum, the Bible teaches that unbelievers who die in their sins will consciously suffer God's just wrath for eternity. This is a weighty doctrine, but as we shall see, it is tightly interwoven with the Christian understanding of God's holiness, justice, and the very gospel of salvation itself.

¹³ ["Contemporary Challenges," Morgan \(gospelcoalition.org\)](#)

¹⁴ ["Contemporary Challenges," Morgan \(gospelcoalition.org\)](#)

¹⁵ ["Contemporary Challenges," Morgan \(gospelcoalition.org\)](#)

¹⁶ ["Contemporary Challenges," Morgan \(gospelcoalition.org\)](#)

¹⁷ ["Contemporary Challenges," Morgan \(gospelcoalition.org\)](#)

Systematic Theological Implications

Why does the traditional doctrine insist on conscious, unending punishment? What does this say about the nature of God, sin, and human souls? In this section, we delve into systematic theology¹⁸ to understand why eternal hell makes sense in the framework of historic Christian theology. Key themes include the infinite seriousness of sin, the perfect justice of God, the resurrection and immortal existence of the wicked, and the integrity of God's victory over evil. Far from being an arbitrary or excessive idea, eternal punishment flows from the Bible's portrayal of who God is and what we are as eternal beings.

Sin Against An Infinite God Warrants Infinite Punishment

In Scripture, sin is not a trivial matter—it is cosmic treason against an infinitely holy and worthy God.¹⁹ Because God's majesty is infinite, even a single sin has an incalculable weight of guilt, for the gravity of the sin is relative to the dignity of the One offended.²⁰ James 2:10 affirms that

¹⁸ Regarding the task of systematic theology, the *New Dictionary of Theology* says, "The method employed by the systematic theologian is to seek to organize thematically the various dimensions and emphases of Scripture and in particular to show their inter-relatedness as they communicate the word of God. This aspect of 'theology' is dependent upon exegesis to discern the meaning of Scripture, biblical theology to grasp the historical-redemptive process of particular themes and historical theology to perceive how elements of truth have become formulated and later developed. Systematic theology is therefore best engaged in through corporate dependence upon the other disciplines within the theological encyclopaedia, and in a humble spirit of prayerful submission to the authority of Scripture" (Ferguson, Sinclair B., and J. I. Packer. *New Dictionary of Theology*, Electronic ed., InterVarsity Press, 2000, p. 671.)

¹⁹ "Cosmic treason" isn't original to me. (What is?! Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 make clear "there is nothing new under the sun.") Dunno where I got it, but it's a common way among theologians to describe sin against a Holy God.

²⁰ God's infinitude and eternity are revealed attributes, not speculative abstractions or human constructs. He is "from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalm 90:2), "the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity" (Isaiah 57:15), whose "greatness is unsearchable" (Psalm 145:3). Scripture grounds moral accountability in the Creator-creature distinction: humanity exchanges worship of "the Creator" for "the creature" (Romans 1:23-25). In classical theism, God is self-existent (aseity), simple, and infinite in dignity, whereas creatures are contingent and dependent. Sin is therefore not merely finite rule-breaking but ontological rebellion of contingent being against Necessary Being. As Anselm argued (*Cur Deus Homo* I.21), the gravity of sin is measured by the dignity of the One offended; Reformed scholastic theology develops this under the categories of divine infinitude and

whoever breaks one law is “guilty of all” due to the holiness of the Lawgiver they offend. Thus, the demerit of sin is infinite, and its punishment justly spans an infinite duration. This helps explain why hell is eternal: the guilt is never exhausted, and the rebellion never ceases. The punishment continues as long as the guilt is not atoned for, which, apart from Christ, is forever. Critics argue it seems disproportionate for God to punish temporal sins eternally. But we must remember whom the sin is against: a limitless, eternal God, as Anselm famously argued—the gravity of sin must be measured by the dignity of the one offended.²¹ David confessed to God, “Against You, You only, have I sinned” (Psalm 51:4), highlighting that sin’s primary offense is toward the Creator, not just other humans. Divine justice is not measured by our human sensibilities but by God’s own righteous standard. The severity of hell communicates in the strongest terms both God’s infinite hatred of sin and His unwavering commitment to uphold the moral order of His universe. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Genesis 18:25). Indeed, God’s justice demands that every sin receive a just recompense (Hebrews 2:2-3). For the unrepentant, that means bearing God’s holy wrath without end. This is not cruelty; it is justice exacted on willing rebels who forever persist in their hatred of God. Notably, Scripture indicates that even in hell, sinners remain unrepentant—they gnash their teeth (a biblical sign of ongoing anger) and continue in sinful attitudes (cf. Revelation 16:11, where those under judgment “cursed the God of heaven.”) As one theologian put it, “Hell is a place where one can never stop sinning ... Since the sinners in Hell keep sinning, there is perpetual punishment.”²² In other words, the damned do not reform in hell; their God-hating, self-centered nature remains, and thus the just wrath on sin continues to meet an ever-festering evil. Were they somehow removed from hell and given the chance to leave, they would run back to their own sinful desire and continue cursing God forever. The eternal duration of punishment, then, reflects both the infinite guilt of sin and the ongoing rebellion of sinners.

moral proportionality. Thus unatoned rebellion against the eternal and infinitely worthy Creator coheres with the doctrine of eternal punishment.

²¹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* I.21

²² ["An Eternal Hell is for Real - The Heresy of Annihilationism?" \(thirdmill.org\)](http://thirdmill.org)

God's Justice And The Moral Order Of The Universe

The doctrine of eternal punishment upholds that God is perfectly just and that ultimately no sin goes unpunished. Whereas in this life, we often see the wicked prosper or escape consequences, Scripture assures us a Day of Judgment is coming when all accounts will be settled (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10). On that day, every thought, word, and deed is brought into judgment (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Matthew 12:36). Eternal hell demonstrates that God takes every sin with utmost seriousness.²³ Jesus emphasized that even “whoever says, ‘You fool!’” is liable to hell fire (Matthew 5:22), and “everyone will give account for every careless word” (Matthew 12:36). This unflinching justice is actually better news than it seems because it means the universe is morally coherent under God’s governance. It feels severe to us, but as the apostle Paul explains, God’s righteous judgment will be revealed when “He will render to each one according to his works” (Romans 2:5-8). Those who persist in evil and disobedience will receive “wrath and fury,” “tribulation and distress” on that day (Romans 2:8-9). Hell is the ultimate expression of God’s retributive justice—what the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession calls “the manifestation of God’s glory” in “the eternal damnation of the reprobate.”²⁴ The endless duration shows that God’s justice is never exhausted; He does not simply punish for a set time and then ignore sin. Some have objected: Wouldn’t simple annihilation²⁵ satisfy justice? If the unrepentant are obliterated, they suffer loss of life—isn’t that enough? However, biblically the concept of justice involves conscious punishment *per se*. Justice is not served if the criminal is unaware or non-existent while “paying” for his crime. Punishment inherently implies a punished party who experiences the penalty. Proverbs 11:21 says, “Be sure of this: the wicked will not go unpunished.” Annihilation, which argues for eventual non-existence, is arguably no punishment at all, even if annihilation occurs after an extended period of punishment—and from the perspective of consciousness might even be a welcome escape from punishment. Thus, annihilation would undercut the moral resolution that Scripture anticipates. The wicked “do not escape”

²³ “Contemporary Challenges,” Morgan (gospelcoalition.org)

²⁴ 1689 2LBC, Chapter 32.1 (see <https://bit.ly/4qKC0jO>).

²⁵ Annihilationism, at its most basic, holds that the fate of the wicked is the ‘eternal destruction’ of eventual non-existence.

forever; rather, and crucially, true justice eternally displays God's holiness and the gravity of defying Him. Revelation portrays the rejoicing of heaven's hosts at God's final judgment on evil—"Hallelujah! The smoke from her [Babylon's] destruction goes up forever and ever" (Revelation 19:3). The saints aren't gloating in cruelty; they are vindicating God's justice and truth. Similarly, eternal hell glorifies God's justice as a perpetual monument to the fact that He does not condone or overlook sin. His wrath is "the fire that will never be quenched" (Mark 9:43)—not because God is implacable or loses control, but because His justice is eternally active against evil. In the harmonious new creation, hell will stand as the quarantine for all that opposes God, ensuring that ultimate shalom—peace and righteousness—is never again disturbed by sin. In short, without an eternal hell, God's triumph over evil would be partial and the display of His glory obscured. With hell, we know that evil is eternally contained and punished, never to afflict the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21:4, 27).

The Resurrection Of The Wicked: Immortality Of The Soul And Body

Historic Christianity teaches a general resurrection of all people—believers to glory and unbelievers to judgment (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). This resurrection entails that every human soul is immortal, or more precisely, that God will sustain each person eternally, whether in heaven or in hell. Jesus said the wicked "will go away into eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46) after a scene of judgment that clearly implies conscious individuals standing before Him. This presupposes that the unsaved dead have been raised to face judgment (as described in Revelation 20:12-15: "the dead, great and small, standing before the throne" to be judged "according to what they had done"). Annihilationism has a hard time explaining why God would resurrect the wicked at all if their destiny is merely to be extinguished. What purpose does an intermediate conscious judgment serve if the final outcome is non-consciousness? The traditional view, by contrast, sees resurrection as fitting because the punishment is eternal and conscious: the wicked are raised so that they can face God's judgment in both body and soul, and then suffer just punishment in both body and soul eternally. Jesus speaks of God "destroying both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Notably, He doesn't say "destroying out of existence"; rather, the word "destroy" (Greek *apollymi*) often means ruin or loss (not

total annihilation).²⁶ It's the same word used in Luke 15:24 ("this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost (*apolōlos*, 'destroyed') and is found"), where it clearly doesn't mean the prodigal ceased to exist. Thus, when Jesus warns of God "destroying soul and body in hell," we understand it as utter ruin of the whole person in Gehenna—the loss of all well-being under God's wrath, not the loss of being itself. Both the physical and spiritual aspects of a person will experience the agony of God's judgment. This implies continuing existence, since a non-existent body cannot "weep and gnash teeth." Furthermore, Scripture indicates the wicked will exist forever in some form: for instance, in Revelation 22:15, after the final judgment, it pictures those "outside" the heavenly city who "are the sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters..."—showing that the wicked are continually excluded from the New Jerusalem while also existing "outside" in a state of loss. Similarly, Daniel 12:2 (as earlier discussed) shows both the saved and unsaved have an everlasting outcome—life for one, contempt for the other. The immortality of the soul has been a standard Christian belief: humans, made in God's image, have a spirit that does not cease at death (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Matthew 25:46). While conditional immortality advocates argue that only the saved gain immortality (citing verses like 1 Timothy 6:16, which says God alone has immortality inherently, or 1 Corinthians 15:53 referring to believers "putting on immortality"), the historic view holds that God grants ongoing existence to all. Immortality in 1 Corinthians 15 refers to the glorified quality of the resurrection body (for the righteous). But nowhere does Scripture say the unsaved will not be raised immortally; in fact, verses we've seen indicate they will be raised to an eternal fate. The nature of the soul as an ongoing personal subsistence is assumed throughout the Bible—e.g. Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man, or His words to the thief on the cross ("Today you will be with me in paradise"—implying consciousness after death). For the wicked, this continuing existence is a curse, not a blessing: "Their worm will not die" (Mark 9:48) can be understood to mean their personal consciousness—the gnawing worm of regret and corruption—will not die.²⁷ In summary,

²⁶ [Themelios, "Destroyed For Ever: An Examination Of The Debates Concerning Annihilation And Conditional Immortality." by Tony Gray](#)

²⁷ [Themelios, "Destroyed For Ever." Gray](#)

systematic theology affirms that human beings are made for eternity. Those united to Christ will enjoy eternal life; those apart from Christ will endure eternal death—but both are eternal, conscious states. There is no indication in Scripture that any human being created in God's image will simply be erased from being. Rather, God's sovereignty over creation and His victory in redemption entail that the existence of persons is His to grant or take (Deuteronomy 32:39; Job 12:10; 1 Samuel 2:6; Acts 17:25, 28; Revelation 1:18). The question is not what He could do in abstraction but what He has revealed He will do in judgment. As the apostle Paul rhetorically asks, God endures "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" to show His wrath and make known His power and to highlight "the riches of His glory" toward the saved (Romans 9:22-23). If God simply annihilated the lost instantly, the full manifestation of His wrath and power would not be seen. Instead, in the eternal conscious punishment of rebels, the saints will forever perceive how great a salvation Christ achieved for them and how holy God is in His just hatred of sin. This leads into our next point—the cosmic and doxological purpose behind hell.

God's Ultimate Victory And The Display Of His Attributes

The coexistence of heaven and hell in eternity serves the ultimate glory of God in all His attributes. God is glorified not only in showing mercy and grace to the undeserving (Ephesians 2:7), but also in demonstrating His holiness, righteousness, and justice (Revelation 16:5-7). The destiny of the wicked manifests the justice of God just as the destiny of the righteous manifests His mercy. Both mercy and justice are part of God's perfection. Hell eternally exhibits God's justice—a "museum" of righteous judgment, so to speak, where the never-ending punishment of sin testifies to God's unchanging purity. This is a hard truth: that the blessed in heaven will somehow be able to count God's judgments as good and right (Revelation 19:1-4). But Scripture indicates that in the age to come, with glorified minds aligned to God's will, the saints will approve of God's judgment and even find occasion to praise Him for it (Psalm 104:35; Revelation 18:20). The presence of hell ensures that the triumph of God's love and holiness is total. There is no loose end where sin just winks out without resolution; instead, sin is forever quarantined and punished. This is important theologically: it means moral dualism is false—Satan and sinners don't get to exist in bliss on their own terms or escape into nothingness. They face

defeat on God's terms. In that sense, annihilation could be seen as too easy an escape—a door out of God's universe. But the wicked cannot escape God. As Revelation graphically puts it, they are tormented "in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb" (Revelation 14:10). Hell is not the absence of God in an absolute sense—rather, it is the presence of God's wrath and justice (Psalm 139:8 notes, "If I make my bed in Sheol, You are there"). There is no corner of creation where one can flee from the omnipresent King. Thus the lost must face God forever, but only as the object of His righteous anger, never of His love. This too underscores God's victory: even in judgment, Christ is Lord of lords. Philippians 2:10-11 says "every knee will bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." The unrepentant will acknowledge His lordship, not in joyful worship, but in defeated despair, unable to deny His supremacy. This eternal acknowledgment of God's justice and Christ's lordship by the damned is part of the final resolution of all things under Christ (Colossians 1:20—though that verse speaks of reconciliation for believers, the broader picture includes the subjugation of all enemies, 1 Corinthians 15:24-25). To summarize, systematic theology sees eternal hell as fitting into God's plan to glorify Himself in all respects and to fully resolve the problem of evil. Hell demonstrates God's unchanging holiness—He will not lighten the demands of His law or the seriousness of sin even after ages upon ages. It shows His inflexible justice—that justice is not compromised or "satisfied" by anything less than an infinite penalty, except in the case of those who shelter under the infinite atonement of Christ! And it upholds human responsibility—those in hell are there because of their willful sin and unbelief, and they continue as eternal testaments to the folly of rejecting God. In the grand scheme, the everlasting distinction of heaven and hell magnifies the grace of God toward the saved ("So great a salvation!") and the justice of God toward the lost ("So great a sin that rejects such grace!"). In eternity, no one will accuse God of injustice. As Abraham said, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). Yes—and the smoke of hell's torment will continually affirm that He has done right, hard as it is for us to contemplate now.

Historical Theology: Consensus And Challenges Through Church History

The doctrine of eternal conscious punishment is not an invention of later theologians; it has been the majority view of the Church since biblical times. Understanding this historical consensus (and the few challenges to it) can strengthen our confidence that we stand in good company with the Church Fathers, the Reformers, and the Puritans in affirming ECT. In this section, we survey what earlier Christians taught about hell, and how modern departures (like annihilationism/conditionalism) are novelties when weighed against the long-held historic orthodoxy. A grasp of historical theology also helps us avoid chronological snobbery—we should be cautious to not jettison a doctrine that giants of the faith rigorously believed and taught, unless Scripture clearly demands it (which, as we've seen, it does not).

Early Church Fathers And Creeds

The earliest post-biblical Christian writings consistently affirm eternal punishment of the wicked. For example, Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 AD) warned of “unquenchable fire” awaiting the corrupt. Justin Martyr (2nd century) wrote that the wicked will be raised and “sent to the punishment of unquenchable fire” to suffer “eternal punishment” (*First Apology*, ch. 52). Athenagoras (2nd cent.) explicitly argued for the immortality of the soul of the wicked so that they could be punished forever, stating that the purpose of resurrection is that “all who were ever born shall be immortal, those who are saved... and those who are punished... that they may endure eternal punishment” (Athenagoras, *On the Resurrection* 19). Perhaps most famously, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) vigorously defended eternal conscious torment in his monumental *City of God*. Augustine refuted those in his day who thought the torments might be purifying or temporary. He wrote: “The phrases ‘eternal punishment’ and ‘eternal life’ are parallel and it would be absurd to use them in the same sentence to mean: ‘Eternal life will be infinite, while eternal punishment will have an end.’ Hence... the eternal punishment also, for those condemned to it, will assuredly have no end.”²⁸ Augustine’s logic, grounded in Matthew 25:46, became a bedrock

²⁸ [Augustine, *The City of God*, 1001-2 \(21.23\)](#)

for Western Christianity's view on hell. The Athanasian Creed (5th century, named after Athanasius though written later) sums up the catholic²⁹ faith: "[Christ] shall come to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies; and they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire." This creed was widely accepted in the medieval church and by the Reformers, clearly stating the dual everlasting outcomes. While there were minority dissenters in the early centuries—e.g., Origen (3rd century) speculated about apokatastasis (universal restoration, meaning even the devils might eventually be saved after purgatorial fires)—such views were condemned as heresy (the 5th Ecumenical Council in 553 AD anathematized the idea that hell's punishments are temporary). Another group, the annihilationists in the early church, were scarce; an example often cited is Arnobius of Sicca (4th century), who opined that the souls of the wicked might ultimately dissolve. But Arnobius was not considered an authoritative teacher and in fact had some doctrinal oddities. By and large, the church fathers—including Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Chrysostom, and Augustine—taught the conscious agony of the damned is unending. They used phrases like "perpetual punishment" and "forever to burn" in contrast to the bliss of the saints.³⁰ This unanimous voice from antiquity underscores that ECT was the traditional understanding of Jesus and the apostles' teachings.

Medieval Church And The Reformation

During the medieval period, the belief in eternal hell remained firmly in place (often with graphic elaborations in artwork and literature, e.g., Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* in the 14th century vividly portrayed hell as eternal—"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" inscribed on its gates). The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc.) inherited and upheld the doctrine of everlasting punishment. John Calvin wrote against psychopannychia ("soul sleep") and affirmed that souls of the lost are conscious after death, awaiting final judgment and eternal damnation. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, emphasized the eternity of the

²⁹ This use of "catholic" here refers to the small-c catholic, as in "universal" church, and not the Roman Catholic Church.

³⁰ [Augustine. *The City of God*. 1001-2 \(21-23\).](#)

punishment as the just desert of sin and a deterrent for believers. Martin Luther, though he had some unconventional ideas about the intermediate state (soul sleep), never denied the finality of hell's torments for the unrepentant. Importantly, the major Reformation confessions codified the doctrine clearly. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) states that at the last judgment, "the wicked, who know not God... shall be cast into eternal torments, and punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" (WCF 33.2).³¹ The 1689 Second London Baptist Confession mirrors that language: "The wicked... shall be cast aside into everlasting torments, and punished with everlasting destruction, from the presence of the Lord" (2LBC 32.2).³² The Puritans of the 17th century, known for their deep reverence for God's holiness, preached hell with sobriety and urgency. Puritan pastor Thomas Watson wrote, "The torments of hell abide for ever... if after millions of years the damned might come out of hell, there would be some hope; but this word 'Ever' breaks the heart."³³ He illustrated eternity with a famous image: If all the earth were a huge sand heap and a bird came every thousand years to take a single grain, by the time it emptied the heap, eternity would still have no end—the damned would still be in hell.³⁴ Watson's point—and that of many preachers of the Great Awakening like Jonathan Edwards—was to shake complacent souls with the sheer endlessness of hell's woe, that they might flee to Christ. Jonathan Edwards in his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" spoke of the unrepentant dangling over hell like a spider over flame, emphasizing that it is only God's mercy delaying the inevitable drop. Edwards also taught that the glorified saints will concur with God's justice in damnation, hard as that seems now. Across the Puritan writings, you'll find detailed expositions on the eternity of hell—they viewed any lessening of the doctrine as compromising God's justice and Scripture's veracity. There were hardly any voices among the Reformers or Puritans entertaining annihilation or universalism—these ideas were seen as outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity.

³¹ <https://thewestminsterstandard.org – WCF 33.2>

³² <https://www.the1689confession.com/chapter-32>

³³ puritanboard.com

³⁴ puritanboard.com

Modern Era And The Rise Of Conditionalism

For most of church history, annihilationism or conditional immortality was a fringe view, found mainly among some sects or individuals. However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, as Enlightenment sensibilities and humanitarian impulses grew, some Christian thinkers began to question the eternity of hell. In the 1800s, a notable debate occurred in Victorian England when some theologians and writers like F.D. Maurice and Samuel Cox, troubled by what they perceived to be a tension between eternal torment and the goodness and fatherhood of God, advocated for either annihilation or some form of ultimate reconciliation.³⁵ This sparked responses from stalwarts like Charles Spurgeon, who called annihilationism “a very pretty poison” which he vigorously refuted, urging instead that “If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies”—highlighting the urgency to warn people.³⁶ In the 20th century, annihilationism gained more traction in evangelical circles primarily through the work of John Wenham, Philip E. Hughes, and Edward Fudge, among others.³⁷ Wenham, an Anglican biblical scholar, in his book *The Goodness of God* (1974) raised the possibility of conditional immortality largely on moral grounds. But the watershed moment came when John Stott, a highly respected evangelical leader, tentatively endorsed annihilationism—or at least raised it as a question—in a 1988 book *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*. Stott admitted that, emotionally, he found the idea of everlasting conscious hell nearly intolerable: “I find the concept of eternal conscious punishment in hell intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it... But our emotions are an unreliable

³⁵ F. D. Maurice (Anglican, 1805-1872) and Samuel Cox (1826-1893), writing in 19th-century England, questioned the traditional doctrine of eternal conscious torment largely on theological and moral grounds. Maurice, in *Theological Essays* (1853), emphasized the fatherhood of God and resisted depictions of judgment he believed were inconsistent with divine love, while Cox in *Salvator Mundi* (1877) argued for a more restorative understanding of divine punishment. Neither denied judgment, but both expressed concern that endless torment appeared disproportionate or incompatible with the goodness of God, contributing to later universalist and conditionalist discussions.

³⁶ [“Over Our Dead Bodies: Embracing the Costs of Warning the Lost” by Greg Morse \(desiringgod.org\)](https://desiringgod.org/)

³⁷ Peterson, Robert A. “Does the Bible Teach Annihilationism?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 156, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1999, pp. 13-27; John W. Wenham, “The Case for Conditional Immortality,” *Themelios* 4.2 (January 1979): 13-20.

guide to truth... my question must be, not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say?"³⁸ Stott, to his credit, said Scripture must have final say—and after studying, he leaned toward the view that the lost are ultimately destroyed, not eternally tormented. Around the same time, theologians like Clark Pinnock and Stephen Travis became outspoken proponents of annihilationism, re-framing hell as "conditional immortality" (only the saved live forever, the rest perish). Edward Fudge's book *The Fire That Consumes* (1982) became a comprehensive case for annihilationism, arguing that the preponderance of biblical language—death, destruction, perish, consume—points to extinction, not perpetual suffering.³⁹ This sparked a vigorous counter-response from evangelical scholarship in the late 20th century. Books like *Hell Under Fire* (2004) feature essays from well-known theologically conservative scholars (D.A. Carson, J.I. Packer, Douglas Moo, Greg Beale, Robert Yarbrough, Sinclair Ferguson, etc.) defending the traditional view. They pointed out that conditionalists often overlooked metaphors or assumed univocal meanings of terms like "destroy" (more on that in the next section). J.I. Packer noted that emotional intuition ("a loving God wouldn't do that") was driving some of the conditionalist shift, cautioning that we must stick to Scripture even when it's hard and culturally unpopular. By the 21st century, annihilationism, though still a minority view among evangelicals, had gained a measure of acceptance in some otherwise conservative circles (e.g., the Lausanne Committee allowed it as a legitimate evangelical option). However, it's important to stress that historic Christian theology has stood firmly against annihilationism. From a historical standpoint, conditional immortality is a novelty—as one scholar observed, its

³⁸ While I disagree with Stott's tentative annihilationism, I certainly agree with his feelings on the terror of hell, as he writes in the [Lausanne Covenant](#) (p 35): "The prospect is almost too dreadful to contemplate; we should be able to speak of it only with tears."

³⁹ This [str.org](#) post, "[Does 'Destruction' Mean Annihilation?](#)" by Amy Hall notes Fudge's influence, but note D. A. Carson's important comment there. While it's not fun to say this so clearly, it's true—annihilationism's central textual claim that the English translation/gloss sounds or feels like how we commonly use the word "destroy" isn't an actual argument for extinction. If "destroy" and other such biblical terms meant "extinction" in their context and original usage, annihilationism would be true—but they don't. Just because we (sometimes) use the word "destroy" to mean something akin to 'extinguish from existence' doesn't mean that transfers to the Bible's usage. To make the point, we use "destroy" colloquially all the time to mean things other than non-existence ("Team A destroyed Team B," "I destroyed that taco," etc.)

widespread popularity “has a much shorter history”, causing evangelicals to ask, if this were a biblical truth, why was it not discovered or taught plainly until recently?⁴⁰ Indeed, attempts have been made to find conditionalist ideas in early figures (some conditionalists even claim Athanasius had hints of it,⁴¹ or cite the few others mentioned earlier), but these are outliers. The overwhelming testimony of church history—from the earliest creeds, through medieval scholastics, to Reformers and evangelical confessions—supports eternal conscious torment as the “default” orthodox doctrine. This doesn’t prove the doctrine (Scripture alone is our final authority), but it should give us serious pause before discarding it. To depart from such a consensus, one ought to have very clear biblical mandate—which, as we will see, annihilationists do not. As the old maxim goes, ‘if it’s true, it’s not new; if it’s new, it’s not true.’⁴² The historic Christian view of hell as eternal punishment has stood the test of time and doctrinal scrutiny.

Refutation Of Annihilationism/Conditionalism

Having laid out the positive case, we now address the major arguments of annihilationism (also known by a variation called “conditional immortality”) and show why they fall short biblically, theologically, and logically. Prominent proponents like Edward Fudge and John Stott have raised several points: (1) Scriptural terms like “destroy,” “perish,” and “death” supposedly indicate extinction rather than ongoing suffering; (2) The character of God and the proportion of justice—they feel eternal

⁴⁰ [“Destroyed For Ever,” Gray \(gospelcoalition\)](#)

⁴¹ [Wes Huff on X](#)

⁴² This is a later Protestant maxim summarizing the principle of doctrinal antiquity. It is not traceable to a single original source, but reflects the spirit of Vincent of Lérins (c. AD 434), who defined doctrine as that “which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all” (*Commonitorium* 2). Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430), writing slightly earlier, likewise appealed to the universal and ancient faith of the church against doctrinal novelty, particularly in his anti-Pelagian works. Similar warnings against innovation appear in later Reformers such as John Calvin, who grounded reform not in novelty but in recovery of apostolic teaching. The maxim thus functions as a rhetorical caution against theological innovation, not as an absolute denial of legitimate doctrinal development.

torment is incompatible with God's love or just overkill for finite sins; and (3) The immortality of the soul—they argue immortality is a gift only for the saved, and the lost simply don't receive eternal life (and thus eventually cease to exist). We will respond to each in turn, demonstrating that the traditional view withstands these challenges and that annihilationism, while often well-intentioned, misinterprets key texts and implications.

Biblical Language (“Destroy,” “Death,” Etc.): Does It Mean ‘Cease To Exist’?

Argument: Annihilationists emphasize verses that speak of the wicked's “destruction” or “death” to say they will “perish” in the sense of non-existence. For example, John 3:16 contrasts eternal life with “perishing”; Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is “death”; Jesus said fear the one who can “destroy soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). They claim these terms naturally mean the complete end of life or being. Edward Fudge wrote that the Old Testament uses dozens of words and images for the fate of the wicked and that “every one sounds like total extinction.”⁴³ John Stott similarly remarked that it would seem strange if people who are said to suffer destruction are not in fact destroyed.⁴⁴

Response: The difficulty with this argument is that it assumes the very point under dispute—namely that ‘destruction’ necessarily means cessation of existence in every context. That is precisely what must be demonstrated, not presupposed. It commits a form of lexical question-begging by assuming a single possible gloss of ‘destroy’ and then building the doctrine upon that assumption.⁴⁵ But in Scripture, words translated “destroy” (Hebrew *abad*; Greek *apollymi* and related terms) frequently signify ruin, loss, or devastation rather than annihilation. A “destroyed” wineskin (Matthew 9:17) does not cease to exist; it becomes useless. The prodigal son was “lost” (*apollymi*) and then found (Luke

⁴³ [“Does ‘Destruction’ Mean,” Hall \(str.org\)](http://str.org)

⁴⁴ [“Does ‘Destruction’ Mean,” Hall \(str.org\)](http://str.org)

⁴⁵ [“Begging the question”](#) does not mean ‘a question begging to be asked,’ despite popular usage; it is an informal fallacy of circular reasoning that assumes the truth of the very conclusion it is trying to prove. (It smuggles the conclusion into the premises). See previous footnote (#39) re under “Modern Era And The Rise Of Conditionalism,” particularly Carson's comments.

15:24), yet he never stopped existing. In 1 Corinthians 5:5, Paul speaks of the “destruction of the flesh” so that the spirit may be saved—clearly not extinction, but ruin in a moral or physical sense. Thus when Jesus warns that God can “destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28), the term need not imply annihilation; it can denote the utter ruin of the whole person under divine judgment.

Likewise, “death” in Scripture is often relational and judicial, not metaphysical extinction. Adam did not cease to exist on the day he ate the forbidden fruit, though God said he would surely die (Genesis 2:17). He entered a state of alienation from God. Revelation 20:14 calls the lake of fire “the second death,” yet Revelation 14:11 and 20:10 describe those in that lake as tormented “forever and ever.” Death, in this context, is a condition of ongoing separation and ruin—a death that never fully ends.

Annihilationism also struggles to explain the phrase “eternal destruction” in 2 Thessalonians 1:9. If destruction means a one-time disappearance, calling it eternal adds little meaning. But if destruction refers to an enduring state of ruin “away from the presence of the Lord,” then “eternal” properly modifies the ongoing condition. The text portrays a perpetual exclusion from God’s favorable presence, not a momentary act followed by nonexistence.

Annihilationists also appeal to prophetic metaphors such as chaff burned up or the wicked becoming “ashes under the soles of your feet” (Malachi 4:3). These images occur in poetic and prophetic contexts and emphasize total defeat, humiliation, and irreversible judgment. To be reduced to ashes is to be utterly vanquished. But such metaphors are not intended to function as technical descriptions of the soul’s ontological state after judgment. Scripture frequently uses images of fire to signify devastation and ruin without implying cessation of existence (Isaiah 66:24; Daniel 12:2).

Moreover, the biblical testimony regarding degrees of punishment presents a serious challenge to annihilationism. Jesus taught that some will receive “many blows” and others “few” (Luke 12:47-48). He declared it will be “more tolerable” for Sodom than for Capernaum on the day of judgment

(Matthew 11:22-24). These statements imply proportional, conscious accountability. If all are ultimately annihilated, the final outcome becomes identical for all, regardless of degree. The traditional understanding, by contrast, allows for varying degrees of eternal punishment consistent with divine justice.

The Character Of God: Is Eternal Torment Unjust Or Unloving?

Argument: Many who move toward annihilationism do so not first from textual exegesis, but from moral discomfort. They ask how a loving God could sustain creatures in misery forever. They struggle with the idea of infinite punishment for sins committed in time and argue that annihilation better reflects divine compassion.

Response: The emotional weight of this doctrine should not be dismissed lightly. Scripture itself says God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). Yet the Bible never allows us to set God's love against His justice. At the cross, mercy and justice meet; Christ bore wrath precisely because divine justice is not negotiable. If eternal punishment seems excessive, we must remember the nature of the One against whom sin is committed. Sin is not merely the breaking of impersonal rules; it is rebellion against an infinitely holy and glorious Creator. The gravity of an offense is measured in part by the dignity of the one offended.

Furthermore, Scripture portrays those under judgment as continuing in hardness rather than repentance. Revelation repeatedly shows people under divine plagues who "did not repent" but "cursed the God of heaven" (Revelation 16:9, 11). There is no biblical hint of post-mortem reform or moral purification in hell. Rather than envisioning penitent souls longing for reconciliation, the biblical imagery suggests persistent rebellion. If rebellion persists, so too does just judgment.

It is also worth noting that annihilation does not necessarily solve the moral concern. The complete erasure of persons made in God's image is itself an act of severe judgment. The issue is not whether God judges, but how He judges. Scripture consistently describes that judgment in terms of punishment, wrath, exclusion, and unending consequence.

The Immortality Question: Do Only Believers Live Forever?

Argument: Conditional immortality proponents argue that immortality is a gift granted only to believers. They point to texts such as Romans 2:7 and 1 Corinthians 15:53-54, which connect immortality with salvation, and note that 1 Timothy 6:16 says God alone has immortality inherently.

Response: Eternal life in Scripture is not merely endless existence; it is a quality of life in fellowship with God (John 17:3). The lost do not receive eternal life in this sense. But Scripture clearly teaches the resurrection of both the just and the unjust (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). The wicked are raised for judgment—a resurrection which implies continued existence. If God resurrects the unjust only to annihilate them, the purpose of resurrection becomes obscure.

Moreover, Revelation 22:15 portrays the wicked as “outside” the New Jerusalem after the final judgment. The imagery suggests ongoing exclusion, not obliteration. Fallen angels, too, are described as suffering eternal fire (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10). If God sustains the existence of rebellious angels for eternal punishment, it is not difficult to see that human beings may likewise endure.

In sum, the biblical teaching does not require us to posit inherent immortality of the soul in a philosophical sense. It does, however, require us to affirm that God will sustain the existence of the righteous in glory and the wicked in judgment. Eternal life is communion with God; eternal punishment is exclusion and ruin—but both are everlasting.

A Brief And Basic Refutation Of Universalism

Beyond annihilationism lies a third proposal: universalism, the claim that all people will ultimately be saved and reconciled to God. Some versions envision hell as temporary and purifying; others deny hell altogether. This view often appeals to texts about God’s universal love or Christ’s cosmic reconciliation.

However, universalism faces even greater tension with the biblical data. Scripture presents final judgment as decisive and irreversible. Hebrews 9:27 states, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes

judgment.” Jesus’ depiction in Matthew 25 culminates in two divergent destinies—“eternal punishment” and “eternal life”—with no suggestion of eventual convergence. Revelation maintains an enduring distinction between those who enter the city and those outside (Revelation 22:14-15). The lake of fire is described as the final state for the devil and those not written in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:15).

Universalism also diminishes the urgency of repentance. If all are ultimately saved regardless of response to Christ, the warnings of Scripture lose their gravity (Luke 13:3-5; 2 Corinthians 6:2). The cross becomes less a rescue from wrath (Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:9) and more a symbolic gesture. Yet the New Testament consistently frames salvation as deliverance from real and everlasting judgment (John 3:36; 1 Thessalonians 1:10).

Moreover, as Michael J. McClymond has argued in his comprehensive historical and theological study of universalism,⁴⁶ the system ultimately reshapes the very meaning of grace, turning it from sovereign mercy into metaphysical inevitability. When salvation becomes certain for all rather than sovereignly bestowed upon the undeserving (Romans 9:15-18; Ephesians 2:8-9; Exodus 33:19), grace ceases to function as grace in the historic Christian sense; it becomes less a free and particular act of divine mercy (Romans 11:5-6) and more an outcome guaranteed by the structure of reality. This unravels the biblical logic of grace, transforming it from a free gift into an expectation.

In summary, though God’s mercy is astonishingly wide (Psalm 145:9; 1 Timothy 2:4), Scripture never portrays it as nullifying justice or rendering judgment provisional (Romans 2:5-8; Nahum 1:3). The consistent biblical narrative is that some enter eternal life and others do not (Matthew 7:13-14; John 5:28-29). Universalism not only requires reinterpreting numerous texts that speak plainly of irreversible condemnation (Matthew 25:46; Revelation 14:11), it also subtly alters the nature of grace itself, transforming it from a sovereign and unmerited gift (Romans 9:16; Titus 3:5) into an inevitable outcome. But grace, by definition, is not owed,

⁴⁶ McClymond, Michael J. *The Devil’s Redemption*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

guaranteed, or metaphysically necessary—it is freely given (Romans 11:6; 2 Timothy 1:9). The biblical gospel announces real deliverance from real wrath (John 3:36; Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:10), not the universalization of salvation irrespective of response. To affirm universal salvation, therefore, is not merely to soften certain warnings; it is to reshape the logic of judgment, mercy, and grace that runs throughout the whole of Scripture.

Conclusion: “The Sobering Reality Of Judgment And The Saving Glory Of Christ”

The doctrine of Eternal Conscious Torment remains the most coherent synthesis of the biblical evidence. It accounts for the parallelism of eternal life and eternal punishment, the language of unending torment, the resurrection of the wicked, the justice of God, and the finality of judgment. Annihilationism cannot adequately reconcile these elements without redefining key terms. Universalism goes further still, dissolving the sharp edge of Christ’s warnings and the gravity of sin.

This doctrine is heavy, but it is not meant to breed cruelty or triumphalism. It should produce: humility, for we deserve judgment; gratitude, for Christ bore wrath in our place; and urgency, for others stand in peril apart from Him. Scripture closes with both warning and invitation: the lake of fire for the faithless (Revelation 21:8), and the free offer of the water of life (Revelation 22:17). The terror of judgment and the tenderness of grace stand side by side.

Hell is not an arbitrary torture chamber designed to satisfy unwarranted divine anger, but the solemn and just consequence of rejecting the God who is Himself the source of life and goodness. In affirming the historic Christian doctrine of eternal punishment, we do so not out of harshness, but out of fidelity to Scripture and concern for souls, and because the reality of hell magnifies the glory of Christ, who saves sinners from it!

Some Good Resources

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- Date, Christopher, et al. *A Consuming Passion: Essays on Hell and Immortality in Honor of Edward Fudge*. Pickwick Publications, 2015.
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- Morgan, Christopher W., and Robert A. Peterson. *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, edited by Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, Zondervan, 2004.
- Ortlund, Dane. *Is Hell Real?* Crossway, 2022.
- Ortlund, Gavin ("Truth Unites" YouTube channel:
 -  Does Hell Make Sense? (10 mins – decent overview/intro)
 -  Annihilationism: Why I'm Not Convinced (39 mins)
 -  Universalism in Church History is a Fascinating Story (26 mins)

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