

GLENDALE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

WHAT THE BIBLE ACTUALLY
SAYS ABOUT

HELL

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I. Introduction: The Challenge of Thinking about Hell

- We don't like to think about hell, because it is an **unpleasant and heartbreaking reality** to face: if the Bible's message is correct, unless people turn to Christ to resolve their sin problem, the default destination for every human being is hell.
- [Rob Bell "Love Wins" video promo]: "*What we believe about heaven and hell is incredibly important because it exposes what we believe about who God is and what God is like.*"—it also exposes what we believe about human beings.
- We **may have acquired some wrong ideas** about hell over the years.
- What the **Bible really teaches** about hell may challenge what we've **always believed**, and/or what we **want to believe**. But if the Bible really is the word of God and if it really teaches there is a hell, we have to face the facts.
- We **can't afford to be wrong** on our view of hell—too much is at stake.

II. Biblical Terminology

- *Sheol* (Hebrew: שְׁאוֹל, in the Old Testament) and *Hades* (Greek: ᾗδης, in the New Testament)
 - Refer in a **predominantly neutral way** to the **"grave"** or the **place of the dead**.
 - In at least one passage, there is an indication that this is a **negative experience** (e.g. Luke 16:23-25)
 - *Hades* is once translated "hell" (Matthew 16:18 "the gates of hell") in the ESV; *Sheol* is never translated "hell."
- *Gehenna* (used 12x in the New Testament)¹ is **the word used consistently for "hell"**
 - An Aramaic name meaning "Valley of Hinnom" near Jerusalem where the people of Judah burned their sons and daughters in worship of the false idol Molech during the time period of the divided kingdom (cf. 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). Jeremiah prophesied that God would destroy such idolaters in the Valley of Hinnom, leave their corpses to rot, and that the sheer number of corpses would prompt the valley to be renamed the "Valley of Slaughter" (Jeremiah 7:29-34, 19:6-9, 32:35).
 - Jeremiah's prophecy led to the word's use to **describe "a place of punishment for those who don't follow God."** In fact, "so ingrained was the belief in hell among first-century Jews that Jesus would have had to go out of His way to distance Himself from these beliefs if He didn't hold them."²
 - It is often alleged that *Gehenna* was the "garbage dump" outside Jerusalem,³ but there's no evidence that this was true in the time of Jesus, and the first reference we have of the valley being Jerusalem's dump was written in AD 1200 by a rabbi who lived in Europe.⁴

¹ In Matthew 5:22, 29, 30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6. With the exception of the James passage, all the statements are from Jesus' own lips.

² Chan and Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell*, 49.

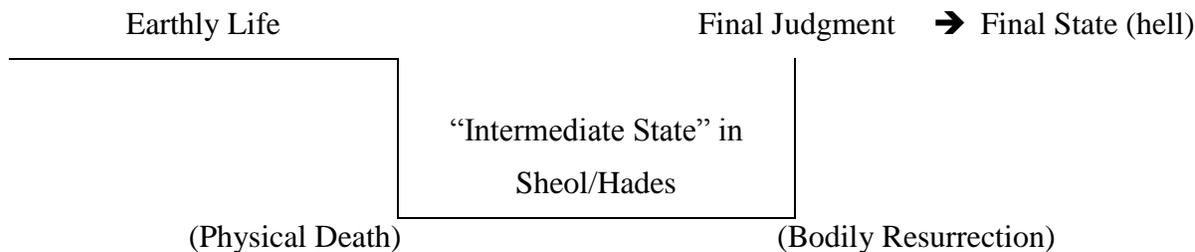
³ Bell, *Love Wins*, 67.

⁴ Chan and Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell*, 60.

- Other terms associated with the place of final judgment include: “**fire**” (Matthew 3:10,7:19; Mark 9:48-49; Luke 3:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Hebrews 10:27; Revelation 14:10), “**unquenchable fire**” (Matthew 3:12; Mark 9:43; Luke 3:17), “**fiery furnace**” (Matthew 13:42), “**eternal fire**” (Matthew 18:8, 25:41; Jude 1:7), **place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30; Luke 13:28), “**death**” (John 5:24, 8:51-52), “**second death**” (Revelation 2:11, 20:6, 14, 21:8), “**destruction**” (Matthew 7:13, Romans 9:22), “**eternal destruction**” (1 Thessalonians 1:9), “**outer darkness**” (Matthew 8:12, 22:13, 25:30), and a “**lake of fire**” (Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14-15, 21:8).

III. Is there an “Intermediate State” for the Unrighteous?

- Scripture indicates that both the righteous and the unrighteous will experience a “**resurrection**,” which refers to the **reuniting of a soul (or spirit) with a body**, at the end of this age.
 - Daniel 12:2 “*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*”
 - John 5:28-29 “*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.*”
- Christians are said to have a **temporary, conscious existence in the presence of God** between their physical death and the resurrection (Ecclesiastes 12:7, Luke 16:19-31, 23:43, Acts 7:59, 2 Corinthians 5:1-8, 12:1-4, Philippians 1:19-26, Revelation 6:9-11).
- One passage in Scripture (Luke 16:19-31) suggests that the **unrighteous have a similar temporary, conscious existence** between their physical death and the resurrection.⁵ This existence is described in very **unpleasant** terms.
- Thus, the understanding of the personal future of the unrighteous involves: 1) physical **death**, 2) likely some sort of conscious unembodied existence in the “**intermediate state**” in Sheol/Hades, and 3) bodily resurrection to **judgment** in hell. It can be expressed graphically as:



⁵ However, Luke 16:19-31 is a parable, and it is wise to be careful not to conclude too much from the details of a parable.

IV. Three Views on Hell

TRADITIONAL VIEW

- Scripture teaches that those who ultimately reject God experience **final separation** from His presence where they **consciously experience** the **just punishment** of their sins for **eternity**. This punishment is not intended to be corrective; it is retributive.
- **Evidence**
 - Daniel 12:2-3 – *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.** 3 And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.*
 - Both the righteous and unrighteous are resurrected to one of only two destinies. Since the destiny of the righteous is unending, this argues that the destiny of the unrighteous is also unending.
 - Both the righteous and the unrighteous are “awake,” suggesting that those in a state of “shame and everlasting contempt” are conscious
 - Mark 9:42-49 – *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to **go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.** 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be **thrown into hell.** 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be **thrown into hell, 48 ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’** For everyone will be salted with fire.”*
 - This passage (and a parallel one in Matthew 18:6-9) contrasts entering eternal “life” missing a hand, foot, or eye, and entering the “eternal fire,” “hell of fire,” or “hell” with those body parts intact. This suggests that the unrighteous will enter hell with some sort of bodily existence.
 - Because it would be “better” to enter life crippled than hell with limbs intact indicates that hell will be very unpleasant.
 - The description that “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” also suggests that this experience is of a never-ending duration.⁶
 - Matthew 25:31-46 – *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...41 “Then he will say to those on his left, **‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’**”*

⁶ The image is from Isaiah 66:22-24.

- There is a final separation of all humanity into two groups (“sheep” and “goats”), reflecting the righteous and unrighteous, respectively.
 - The unrighteous are sent to “eternal fire” or “eternal punishment” (these two descriptions seem to refer to the same place), which emphasizes a never-ending duration.
 - The unrighteous are sent to the same place where the devil and his angels are sent, so it is logical to assume that unrighteous humans experience the same punishment as Satan and the angels do. Since Revelation 20:10 indicates that the devil “will be tormented day and night forever and ever,” this suggests that the unrighteous will experience the same.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 – *This is evidence of the **righteous judgment** of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—6 since indeed God considers it just to **repay with affliction** those who afflict you, 7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, **inflicting vengeance** on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 **They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might**, 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*
- This is a description of retributive, not corrective, punishment on the unrighteous (“righteous judgment,” “repay with affliction,” “inflicting vengeance,” and “suffer the punishment”).
 - A key feature of “eternal destruction” is that it involves being “away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His might.” This may suggest that those who are kept “away” are conscious that they are excluded from the presence of the Lord.
- Jude 7 – *just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a **punishment of eternal fire**.*
- Jude 13 – *wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the **gloom of utter darkness** has been **reserved forever**.*
- The “utter darkness” (Jude 13) suggests a similar fate as the fallen angels who were “kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness” (Jude 6) until the final judgment. For the angels, this seems to be a conscious experience, so it would be logical to assume that humans who suffer a similar fate would be conscious, as well.
 - “Utter darkness” may correlate with Matthew’s talk of the “outer darkness” (though they are different words in Greek) where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (cf. Matthew 8:12, 22:13, 25:30). The presence of “weeping” and “gnashing” suggesting a conscious, never-ending experience.

- Since Jude describes the same experience of judgment as “fire” in v. 7 and as “darkness” in v. 13, this suggests that the descriptions are intended to be taken metaphorically, not literally.
- Revelation 14:9-11 – *And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also will **drink the wine of God’s wrath**, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and **he will be tormented with fire and sulfur** in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 **And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night**, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”*
 - This is a description of retributive, not corrective, punishment on the unrighteous (“God’s wrath,” “his anger”)
 - Since the “smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever,” and “they have no rest, day or night,” this suggests they undergo a conscious, never-ending, and very unpleasant experience.
- Revelation 20:10-15 – *and the **devil** who had deceived them was **thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur** where the **beast** and the **false prophet** were, and **they will be tormented day and night forever and ever**. 11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw **the dead**, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then **Death and Hades** were **thrown into the lake of fire**. **This is the second death, the lake of fire**. 15 **And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire**.*
 - The unrighteous are “thrown into the lake of fire” (v. 15), presumably to experience the same punishment that the devil, beast, and false prophet experience: “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (v. 10; cf. Matthew 25:41 “*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*”)
 - This terminology describes a conscience, never-ending, and very unpleasant experience.
- The traditional view has been the **overwhelming consensus of the church** since the earliest period, indicating that the vast majority of Christians through history have concluded that this is what the Bible teaches.
- Eternal conscious punishment may be **necessary for the sake of God’s justice**: “Evil that remains unpunished does detract from God’s glory in the universe...when God punishes evil and triumphs over it, the glory of his justice, righteousness, and power to triumph over all opposition will be seen (see Rom. 9:17, 22–24).”⁷

⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1151.

ANNIHILATIONISM

- “Those who do not avail themselves of the atonement made by Jesus in his suffering and death must **make their own atonement by suffering and then death**, separated from the sustaining life of God and thus disappearing from the cosmos.”⁸
- **Types of Annihilationism**⁹
 - **Pure Mortalism** – human life is so closely tied to the physical organism that when the body dies, the person as an entity ceases to exist.
 - **Conditional Immortality** – human beings are by nature mortal, so death is the end. God gives Christians immortality or eternal life as a gift.
 - **Annihilationism Proper** – the extinction of human life at death comes about as a direct result of sin—“*the wages of sin is death*” (Romans 6:23). This extinction may occur after the individual has experienced the full punishment for sin.
- **Evidence**
 - Hell is often depicted in terms of “fire,” but a fire “**consumes**” whatever is thrown into it. Therefore, language of the unrighteous being thrown into “hell” or “fire” suggests that they will eventually be **completely consumed and their existence will terminate**.
 - Expressions using the adjective “eternal” may indicate 1) that the activity goes on and on forever, or 2) that only the **implications/consequences of the activity go on and on forever**.
 - So, “eternal punishment” in Matthew 25:46 may refer to a “punishment” that has an **eternal consequence** (namely, termination).
 - Language of “destruction” or “death” in judgment passages **most naturally refers to termination**.
 - Psalm 37:20 – *But the wicked will perish; the enemies of the LORD are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish—like smoke they vanish away.*
 - Matthew 7:13 – *Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.*
 - Hebrews 10:39 – *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.*
 - 2 Peter 2:1 – *But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.*
 - 2 Peter 2:6 – *...if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly....*
 - 2 Peter 3:7 – *But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.*

⁸ Stackhouse, “Terminal Punishment,” 61.

⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1244-1245.

- Language such as “unquenchable fire,” “smoke ascending forever and ever,” and “the worm that does not die” are borrowed from the prophetic literature of the Old Testament—literature that is usually **expressed using poetry**. But, poetry, as a literary genre, often **uses exaggeration and imagery** and appeals primarily to the **emotions**, instead of primarily communicating propositional truth.
- The book of Revelation is written in an apocalyptic style.¹⁰ This style makes extensive use of **symbolism and exaggeration to communicate** timeless truths.
 - Even most adherents of the traditional view do not believe that Revelation 14 and 20 require that hell must be a literal “lake of fire.”
 - Expressions of torment “forever and ever” may be a “highly symbolic representation of a fundamental, historical truth, that the enemies of God will be soundly, eternally defeated and receive the full recompense for their crimes.”¹¹
- There is no reason to believe that human souls were created with the quality of being immortal—only God has the property of life in Himself. Therefore, **immortality is something that we must receive from God**, not something that we already possess. For the unrighteous, who were not given eternal life by God, there is no reason to suppose that they must now live forever in hell.
 - Matthew 10:28 – *And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear **him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.***
 - John 3:16 – *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him **should not perish but have eternal life.***
 - 1 Corinthians 15:21 – *For as by a man came death, **by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.***
- Finite human beings can only commit a **finite amount of sin**, and a finite amount of sin only **warrants a finite amount of punishment**. Thus, the traditional view contradicts the **goodness, love, and compassion** of God and contradicts the **justice of God** because the punishment is not proportionate to the offense.
- The logic of justice is such that only the punishment and death of a human being can pay the penalty for the sin he or she has personally committed. **Either Jesus pays for it, or the individual sinner must.**

¹⁰ The word ‘apocalypse’ (from the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις *apocalypsis*) means a ‘revelation’ or ‘unveiling’, so that an apocalyptic book claims to reveal things which are normally hidden and to unveil the future.

¹¹ Stackhouse, “Terminal View,” 74.

UNIVERSALISM

- “At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, **everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God’s presence**. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most “depraved sinners” will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.”¹²
- This position is **not religious pluralism** (i.e. the idea that all religions represent many different—though equally valid—ways of salvation). Christian Universalists believe that **Christ is the only way**, but hold out hope that God will end up saving everyone through Christ and that the Bible teaches this.
- **Evidence**
 - Colossians 1:16-20 – *For by [Christ] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him... 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*
 - Philippians 2:9-11 *Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*
 - Jesus died **for all people**, to **save all people**.
 - John 3:17 – *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*
 - Romans 5:18 – *Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.*
 - 1 Corinthians 15:22 – *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*
 - 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 – *For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*
 - 1 Timothy 2:3-6 – *This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.*
 - Hebrews 2:9 – *But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*
 - 1 John 2:2 – *He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

¹² Bell, *Love Wins*, 107.

- The traditional notion of hell “represents God’s permanent failure to bring about his purposes in the case of all [His] creatures. He tried to stop them before it was too late, but they slipped through his fingers like sand.”¹³ Will God’s desire to save all people be satisfied or eternally frustrated?¹⁴ Does God get what God wants?¹⁵
- The biblical God is a God “*who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist*” (Romans 4:17). **No one can be destroyed beyond the hope of divine recovery.**
 - Ezekiel 16:53-55 – ***I will restore their fortunes, both the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters, and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes in their midst, 54 that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all that you have done, becoming a consolation to them. 55 As for your sisters, Sodom and her daughters shall return to their former state, and Samaria and her daughters shall return to their former state, and you and your daughters shall return to your former state.***
 - There seems to be a future for the city of Sodom
 - Romans 11:7-23 – *Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened... 23 And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.*
 - Even where there is a sharp—and seemingly, final—distinction between the “elect” and those who were “hardened” out of Israel, there seems to be a possibility for restoration.
- A “specific pattern of divine punishment occurs again and again in the Bible, acquiring the status of a normative paradigm. This is the pattern of **judgment followed by restoration.**”¹⁶ Why would hell not follow the same pattern?
 - God’s people face horrible judgments (Jeremiah 30:5-7) *followed by* wonderful salvation (Jeremiah 30:7-11)
 - God’s people have an incurable wound (Jeremiah 30:12-15) *followed by* God’s healing (Jeremiah 30:16-17)
 - God sends a storm of divine wrath (Jeremiah 30:23-24) *followed by* covenant renewal (Jeremiah 31:1)
 - Jeremiah 48:42-47 – *Moab shall **be destroyed** and be no longer a people...47 Yet I will **restore the fortunes of Moab** in the latter days, declares the LORD.*
 - Jeremiah 49:37-39 – *I will terrify Elam before their enemies and before those who seek their life. I will **bring disaster** upon them, my fierce anger, declares the LORD. I will send the sword after them, **until I have consumed them** ...39 “But in the latter days I will **restore the fortunes of Elam**, declares the LORD.”*

¹³ Parry, “A Universalist Response,” 90.

¹⁴ Parry, “A Universalist View,” 107.

¹⁵ Bell, *Love Wins*, 95. This is the title of the fourth chapter in the book.

¹⁶ Parry, “A Universalist View,” 113.

- The Bible **does not directly address** the issue of whether it is possible to turn to Christ after one has died. There is no reason to think that God would stop loving those in hell or desiring their best.

V. Evaluating the Evidence

- The traditional view presents a very strong case from an impressive number of Bible passages—several from the lips of Jesus, Himself—that the unrighteous will be **resurrected** to experience **never-ending, conscious punishment**. In my judgment, this is a persuasive argument for the traditional view.
- The main objections to the traditional view are usually **theological and ethical** concerns:
 - Never-ending, conscious punishment is alleged to be incompatible with the **goodness, love, and compassion** of God. “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not the kind of deity who tortures people (even the worst of sinners) in this way.”¹⁷
 - BUT, God is also **just and holy**. For God to leave sin unpunished or under-punished would also us to question His goodness, love, and compassion for the victims of sin.
 - ALSO, the Bible doesn’t give us details about the nature of punishment in hell. The varied terminology suggests an unpleasant experience, but there may be quite a bit of exaggeration in the metaphors employed.
 - Never-ending, conscious punishment is alleged to be incompatible with the **justice of God**: finite human beings can only commit a **finite amount of sin**, and a finite amount of sin only **warrants a finite amount of punishment**.
 - BUT, no Scripture tells us that humans can only commit a finite amount of sin. It is just as possible that “[an] infinite factor is involved in every human sin, for we are raising a finite will against the will of an infinite being.”¹⁸ It is impossible for us to fully comprehend the extent of the evil done when finite human beings rebel against an infinite God.
 - ALSO, Jesus indicates that there are degrees of punishment in hell (Matthew 11:21-24; Luke 12:42-48), which suggests that God does “make the punishment fit the crime.” “The principle here seems to be, the greater our knowledge, the greater is our responsibility, and the greater will be our punishment if we fail in our responsibility.”¹⁹
 - In the end, “[we] need to surrender our perceived right to determine what is just and humbly recognize that God alone gets to decide how He is going to deal with people.”²⁰

¹⁷ Pinnock, “Response to John F. Walvoord,” 220.

¹⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1247.

¹⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1247.

²⁰ Chan and Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell*, 131.

- The knowledge that loved ones are experiencing never-ending, conscious punishment is alleged to **rob Christians of joy** in the new creation
 - BUT, Scripture pictures God as judging justly—and this judgment does not threaten His joy—and all the angels, saints, and martyrs praise Him for His judgment. At the resurrection, our minds, hearts, motives, and feelings will be conformed to His outlook—presumably including His outlook on justice. In that position—which none of us have yet experienced—it is at least possible that this knowledge will not rob us of our joy, either.
- It is important to recognize that the **terminology** used to describe hell is **largely metaphorical**. Hell is real, but there is some question as to how literally to understand the descriptions of it:
 - How can “worms” and “fire” coexist together (Mark 9:48)?
 - How can there be “eternal fire” in a place of “gloom of utter darkness” (Jude 7, 13)?
 - Since descriptions of hell are largely metaphorical, it is legitimate to question whether there is a natural inference to be made by the choice of description:
 - Does “fire” language suggest the “consumption” of what it burns?
 - Does the language of the “smoke of their torment going up forever and ever” merely suggest the seriousness and finality of judgment?
 - Do the “worms” suggest the total corruption of biological matter until there is nothing left to be destroyed?
 - Does the “destruction” and “death” language in annihilationist passage—where it is clearly not speaking of physical death at the end of this life—suggest ultimate termination?
 - Does the “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” imagery simply picture a condition of great sorrow, loss, and woe? Does it matter that these terms do not involve the suggestion of termination?
 - If the descriptions could involve some exaggeration and use of symbolic imagery—particularly in the book of Revelation—this should **caution us to be careful that we don’t read these descriptions too “literalistically.”**
 - In my judgment, this is this is a persuasive argument for annihilationism.
- There is a possibility that the adjective “eternal” only speaks of a **consequence that is never-ending** (instead of a never-ending action):
 - “Eternal punishment” in Matthew 25:46 may not refer to a never-ending and ongoing “punishing” of the unrighteous, but rather of a **“punishment”—termination—that is never-ending in its effect** (the unrighteous will never be returned to life again).
 - “eternal destruction” in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 may not refer to a never-ending and ongoing “destroying” of the unrighteous, but rather of a **“destruction”—termination—that is never-ending in its effect** (the unrighteous will never be returned to life again).
 - “eternal judgment” in Hebrews 6:2 may not refer to a never-ending and ongoing “judging” of the unrighteous, but rather of a **“judgment”—termination—that is never-ending in its effect** (the unrighteous will never be returned to life again).

- In my judgment, this is this is a persuasive argument for annihilationism.
- The main **theological and ethical** objection to annihilationism is the allegation that it is incompatible with the justice of God because **the unrighteous get off too easily**.
 - This is particularly true for the Pure Mortalism or Conditional Immortality versions of annihilationism, for this would mean that their lives cease with death and may not receive the punishment that they deserve. Hitler and Stalin would receive the same punishment—termination—as Gandhi.
 - The annihilationism position defended by Stackhouse and Pinnock, however, views God resurrecting the unrighteous to experience retributive punishment, and only after they have fully atoned for their sin does their existence terminate. In my judgment, this version of annihilationism is not incompatible with the justice of God.
- In my judgment, the assumption that human souls are inherently immortal is very problematic. God warned Adam and Eve that “*in the day that you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall surely die*” (Genesis 2:17). This clearly refers to physical and spiritual death in this life, but it may well also extend to ultimate termination of existence. This may be an unwarranted assumption of the traditional view.
- The biblical evidence for universalism is **very weak**:
 - Colossians 1:20 may picture God working to “*reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross,*” but in the rest of the passage, this statement is clearly **conditioned upon the continued faithfulness of believers**—the unrighteous are not in view here: “*...if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven*” (Colossians 1:23).
 - The statements that the Philippians’ opponents will face “*destruction*” (Philippians 1:28) and that their “*end is destruction*” (Philippians 3:19), argues **against** thinking that the unrighteous **will voluntarily bow the knee and confess** Jesus as Lord in Philippians 2:9-11. Far more likely is that the unrighteous will **be forced to bow/confess in their defeat**.
 - The statements that Jesus “died for all people” have to be **understood in connection with statements that speak of two final destinies**. Theologically, the idea of universal atonement understands Christ’s death as making salvation **available** for all persons, “but his atoning death **becomes effective only when accepted** by the individual.”²¹ This is apparent in the context of several of the verses cited by Parry, for example: 1 Corinthians 15:22 – *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ*. The “all” in v. 22 is clearly referring only to “those who belong to Christ” in v. 23.
 - Parry’s argument concerning the Jeremiah passages of “judgment followed by restoration” have glossed over the grim biblical truth that **only a remnant** of Israel’s people survived the awful respective exiles of northern and southern kingdoms and the **vast majority of the people in the nation perished** as part of the judgment. These promises were made to the nation, which was restored, just as God promised. However, the individuals who suffered God’s retribution for their sins **did not experience** this restoration. The same is true for the **people of the other nations**. In the same way, the

²¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 846.

- cryptic message of the restoration of Sodom in Ezekiel 16 only indicates the restoration of the city of Sodom; it gives no reason to believe that it will restore the generation of exceedingly wicked people who were living in Sodom on the day it was destroyed.
- Parry’s argument that the **Revelation passages fit his universalist pattern of “judgment followed by salvation”** is very problematic.
 - Revelation 14:9-11 is followed by 15:3-4 in which all the nations—which Parry assumes will include even the ungodly who were “tormented with fire and sulfur” in Revelation 14—will voluntarily come to worship the Lord.²² But, this reads too much into the passage: Revelation 5:9 indicates that the Lamb merely “ransomed *[some] people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.*” Several other passages in Revelation indicate that **most among the nations will refuse to repent** (Revelation 9:20–21, 16:9, 11).
 - Revelation 20:10-15 is followed by 21:22-27 in which the nations “bring offerings into” the new Jerusalem, which Parry assumes means that they came from “outside” the city, where in 22:14-15 the area is populated by sinners (cf. 22:15 “*Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood*”)²³ But, this reads something into the text and takes both passages out of context: it is more likely that where the nations come from in Revelation 21 is unrelated to the image in Revelation 22, which describes the place of those who are cut off from the covenant community.
 - The picture of re-grafting in Romans 11 does **not give any indication** that the re-grafting **can occur after death**; it merely leaves open the possibility that one whose heart is hardened to the gospel **may yet change their unbelief**—presumably in this life—and be re-grafted into the community of God’s people.
 - Both the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and the parable about the narrow door (Luke 13:22-30) are built upon the premise that **there is no hope for a change in one’s final circumstances**.
 - The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) indicates that a “*great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us*” (v. 26).
 - The Luke 13 passage uses language that elsewhere is used of hell: “*When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ 26 Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ 27 But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ 28 In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out.*” (Luke 13:25-28).

²² Parry, “A Universalist View,” 123.

²³ Parry, “A Universalist View,” 123-124.

- The main **theological** arguments for universalism are based in a **particular understanding of the nature of God**:
 - In my judgment, universalism **overemphasizes the love of God** at the **expense of His justice**. But, God’s judgment of the wicked is an integral part of His putting things right (e.g. Revelation 18:20, 19:1-2)
 - Questions like “Will God’s desire to save all people be satisfied or eternally frustrated?” and “Does God get what God wants?” seriously **oversimplify the nature of God’s will**.
 - Scripture indicates there are things that God “wants” that human beings are able to resist: for instance, 1 Thessalonians 4:3 – “*this is the **will of God**, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality*”...enough Christians fail in this area that it is clear that God frequently **doesn’t** get what He wants here!
 - Scripture also indicates there are things that God “wants” He will cause to happen and which no human can resist: for instance, Acts 17:30-31 “*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because **he has fixed a day** on which he will judge the world in righteousness.*”
 - Theologically, this is the important **difference** between God’s “**moral will**” and His “**decreed will**.”²⁴
 - God may “*not [wish] that any should perish*” (2 Peter 3:9) in His “moral will,” but, if a human being, who has been given every opportunity to repent, persistently refuses God’s offer of grace, God is not willing to violate His “decreed will” that gives human beings a free choice in the matter—He **will not overrule** their decision **or force them** to spend eternity with Him against their will.

²⁴ Chan and Sprinkle, *Erasing God*, 31.

VI. Conclusions

- In my judgment, both the **traditional view** and **annihilationism** are **viable, biblically-consistent positions** regarding the existence and nature of hell.
 - The decision between the two largely hinges on **how we interpret** the biblical descriptions of hell—a more literalistic reading tends to lead to the traditional view, while seeing more metaphor and symbolic descriptions tends to lead to annihilationism.
 - In practice, both see the same sober reality for the unrighteous: eternal separation from God and a perfectly just punishment for one’s sins.

- In my judgment—and in spite of how much I wish it were otherwise—I **do NOT believe that universalism is a viable biblical option.**
 - We do not want to give a “false hope” to anyone that gives them another excuse to reject Christ in the hope that it will all turn out OK anyway.
 - We should not even mention this as an option. I have discussed it here so we have answers if the other person brings it up.

- This means that based on our best understanding of what God has revealed to us about heaven and hell, every human being who ultimately rejects Him will be resurrected to be punished for their sins for the rest of their existence. **Our renewed awareness of this reality should change our “business as usual”**
 - The non-Christians we know need to hear this message...each of us has the ability to tell them
 - We need to stop messing around with the sin that entangles us and re-commit to living like the people God wants us to be

- Because hell is real, we should **not be afraid** of sensitively speaking about it when appropriate.
 - Paul certainly spoke of final judgment at key moments of his ministry (e.g. Acts 17:30-31, 24:24-25)
 - “How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?” (Penn Jillette, from Penn & Teller, a committed atheist)

- We need to be very wise regarding the **strategy and manner by which** we talk about hell and final judgment
 - In my experience, standing on a street corner with a bullhorn and telling people they will burn in hell is **very off-putting**. And if people are put off by the **manner** in which we speak of eternal realities, they will not at all be inclined to **listen** to the message.
 - In my opinion, a far better manner is in a way that expresses genuine personal compassion for the other person.

VII. Bibliography

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- Carson, D. A. *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011. (traditional view) Carson's book is not specifically about hell, but one of the chapters is devoted to a refutation of annihilationism, and the arguments he employs are carefully nuanced and convincing. (I have a paper copy if you are interested in borrowing it)
- Chan, Francis, and Preston Sprinkle. *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We Made Up*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: David C Cook, 2011. (traditional view) If you want to read one book on hell, this is the one to read. Chan (a pastor) writes with a great burden for the lost and the practical implications, and Sprinkle (a NT scholar) brings a wealth of background and learning to the table. The best presentation and defense of the traditional view in this bibliography.
- Crockett, William, ed. *Four Views on Hell*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996. Four essays by proponents of the "Literal View" (John Walvoord), "Metaphorical View" (William Crockett), "Purgatorial View" (Zachary Hayes, a Roman Catholic), and the "Conditional View" (Clark Pinnock). I found this book to be the least helpful, and surprisingly dated. The best essay is Pinnock's, and it would still be worth a read (this edition is included for free if you purchase the Amazon Kindle edition of the 2nd edition below; also, I have a paper copy if you are interested in borrowing it).
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- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994. (traditional view) Briefly defends the traditional view, and has a good summary of arguments for and against annihilationism. (I have a paper copy if you are interested in borrowing it)
- Sprinkle, Preston, ed. *Four Views on Hell*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2016. Four essays by proponents of "Eternal Conscious Torment"²⁵ (Denny Burk), "Terminal Punishment"²⁶ (John G. Stackhouse, Jr.), "A Universalist View" (Robin A. Parry), and "Hell and Purgatory" (Jerry L. Walls, an evangelical protestant). I highly recommend the essays by Stackhouse and Parry if you are interested in reading about annihilationism and universalism, respectively. The whole book is worth a read if you are interested in seeing engagement on the views. A purchase of the Amazon Kindle edition also includes the first edition of this book.

²⁵ "Eternal Conscious Torment" seems to be the preferred contemporary moniker for the traditional view.

²⁶ "Terminal Punishment" is John Stackhouse's preferred moniker for annihilationism.