

# **Is God a Tormenting Fire?**

- ✓ **The OT, the gospels, epistles and Revelation all teach that there is a Day of Judgment at the end of the age when those outside of Christ will be judged according to their works**
- ✓ **After the judgment these will be sent to the lake of fire, also referred to as 'the second death'.  
*'Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire' (Rev.20:14-15)***
- ✓ ***'But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death' (Rev.21:8)***

**For centuries the orthodox teaching of the Church is that the unsaved will suffer eternal conscious torment**

**1) Is eternal conscious torment consistent with the character of God?**

**'The angel, binding you hand and foot, holds you one single moment over the mouth of the chasm. He bids you look down—down—down. There is no bottom; and you hear coming up from the abyss, sullen moans, and hollow groans, and screams of tortured ghosts. You quiver, your bones melt like wax, and your marrow quakes within you. Where is now thy might? And where thy boasting and bragging? Ye shriek and cry, ye beg for mercy; but the angel, with one tremendous grasp, seizes you fast, and then hurls you down, with the cry, "Away, away!" And down you go to the pit that is bottomless, and roll for ever downward—downward—downward—ne'er to find a resting-place for the soles of your feet'**

**(Charles Spurgeon)**

**'It is everlasting wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long for ever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all...**

**'...You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: For "who knows the power of God's anger?"'**

**(Jonathan Edwards)**

**'The torments of hell abide for ever... If all the earth and sea were sand, and every thousandth year a bird should come, and take away one grain of this sand, it would be a long time ere that vast heap of sand were emptied; yet, if after all that time the damned may come out of hell, there were some hope; but this word EVER breaks the heart'**  
**(Thomas Watson)**

**'If a Christian loves God, he must love hell, too. If God decrees it, it must be good and for God's glory, and the evangelical knows that he will sing God's praise eternally as the smoke ascends from the burning pit! AMEN!...When Christ asks, "Do you love Me?" He is asking also "Do you love hell?"'**  
**(John Gerstner)**

**No wonder C.S. Lewis said:  
'There is no doctrine I would more willingly remove from Christianity if it were in my power!'**



**\*Is eternal conscious torment consistent with God's love? Does the One who said, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked' rejoice in the eternal conscious suffering of the unsaved?**

**\*Is it consistent with God's justice when He specifies in His law that an offender shouldn't receive more punishment than his due?**

***'...if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, that the judge will cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence, according to his guilt, with a certain number of blows. Forty blows he may give him and no more, lest he should exceed this and beat him with many blows above these, and your brother be humiliated in your sight'***

**(Deut.25:2-3)**

- **Jesus paid the just judgment for the sin of the world, i.e. suffering followed by death, not eternal torment. The cross is the clearest manifestation of God's wrath against sin**
- **For those who reject God and His salvation, the forfeiture of life is what is just, not trillions of years of torture**
- **Those 'in Christ' are delivered from it. To those outside - the wrath of God abides on them**
- **Paul claimed he was '*innocent of the blood of all men*' because he taught the whole counsel of God. He never held back anything God revealed to him**
- **Yet he never once taught that unrepentant sinners would suffer eternal conscious torment**

- ✓ **He never even used the word 'hell', yet he spoke more about the judgment to come than any other**
- ✓ **He used the words perish, destruction, destroy wrath, etc. E.g. Rom.2:12; 1 Cor.3:17; 16:22; Phil.1:28; 3:19; 1 Thes.5:3; 2 Thes.1:9**
- ✓ **He pointed to the cross as the place where God's justice against sin was upheld**
- ✓ **If Jesus' death was in the place of the sinner suffering sin's penalty, then what does this teach us about final punishment? That the wages of sin is death**
- ✓ **The burnt offering proclaimed this too. It was totally destroyed, reduced to ashes. This is the fate of sinful mankind outside of Christ - annihilation**

## 2) Does the Bible really teach eternal conscious torment?

- **First it is clear that the judgment is eternal. The Bible speaks of 'eternal fire' (Matt.18:8; 25:41), 'eternal punishment', (Matt.25:46), 'everlasting destruction' (2 Thes.1:9), etc. Whatever happens to those punished is for eternity. There is no reprieve.**
- **The Greek word most used to describe the fate of the unsaved is *apollumi* which means to destroy, die, lose or perish.**
- **It is translated in other places in reference to killing e.g. Matt.2:13; 12:14. Never as everlasting torment. That which is killed, destroyed or perishes has ceased to function, has ceased to be**

- **Those who reject Christ will die, perish, be ruined, destroyed, i.e. they will be reduced to non-existence (E.g. Jn.3:16; Rom. 6:23; Acts 3:22-23)**
- **Other examples:** *'For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law' (Rom.2:12).* *'These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power' (2 Thes.1:9).* *'The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance' (2 Pet.3:9)*

- **If something is said to die, be ruined, be destroyed and perish how can it be said to remain alive and continue to exist? Even more, how can it be said to eternally and consciously suffer torment?**
- **In the OT *Sheol* is depicted as the place of abode for both the righteous and unrighteous after death (Gen.37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Psa.49:15). It is the same as the Greek word *hades*. Nowhere is it ever regarded as a place of torment. The term *hades* means 'the unseen realm'. Whilst the wicked had no expectation of leaving *Sheol* in the OT, the righteous expressed their hope that God would deliver them from this place to enjoy fellowship with Him again (e.g. 1 Sam.2:6; Psa.16:9-11)**

- **In the Psalms and Proverbs we read that the end of the wicked is to be cut off as though they never existed, but the righteous will endure forever (Psa.9; 21:4-10; 36:9-12; 49:8-20; 52:5-9; Prov.2:21-22; 10:25; 12:7; 24:15-20)**
- **Nowhere in the OT is there any suggestion that the unrighteous are tormented forever as punishment for their wicked ways. Every description of them is that they will cease to be. For example, they will be cut down like grass and wither (Psa.37:2), perish (Psa.1:6), be destroyed and cut off (Psa.37:38), be blown away like chaff (Psa.1:4), be no more (Psa.104:35), be like wax that melts and smoke that vanishes and they will perish (Psa.68:2)**

- ✓ **Some of these references may refer to what will eventually happen to the wicked in this life, but certainly some are references to the life hereafter.**
- ✓ **E.g. 'When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me – until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors' (Psa.73:16-19)**



**In the final chapter of the OT we read,**

***“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,” says the LORD of hosts, “That will leave them neither root nor branch. But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this,” says the LORD of hosts’ (Mal.4:1-3)***

- **Hades is the intermediate state for those who reject Christ. But hades, along with death, will ultimately be cast into the lake of fire**
- **The term *gehenna* is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *ge-hinnom* = the Valley of Hinnom**
- **When the Israelites fell into idolatry they worshipped Molech and passed their children through the fire here. It later became a rubbish dump where the garbage and sewage was brought from the city and burnt. The fire never ceased to burn here**
- **Jesus used this word and picture to illustrate the furnace of fire: *'...where "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched..."* (Mk.9:48). Note: it is the worm that does not die and the fire which is not quenched, not the people**

- **This is a quote from Isa.66:24, where the dead bodies of God's enemies are consigned to the city's rubbish dump to be eaten by maggots and burned with fire. *'And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh'***
- **The worm (*skolex*) is the kind that feeds on dead bodies. It is a grub or maggot which devours that which is already dead. The fire and maggots will not cease until their work of destruction is complete, i.e. until there is nothing left to devour**
- **The main purpose of fire is not to torment or cause pain but to consume – to destroy. This is the wrath of God. God is a consuming fire, not a tormenting fire**

- ✓ **When God's holiness meets man's sinfulness the consuming fire of His wrath is inevitable, resulting in destruction, not unending torment. E.g. 'Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD' (Lev.10:1-2)**
- ✓ **'And he said, "Please, show me Your glory." Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live"' (Ex.33:18-20)**

- ✓ ***'And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment"' (Num.16:20-21)***
- ✓ ***'Therefore understand today that the LORD your God is He who goes over before you as a consuming fire. He will destroy them and bring them down before you; so you shall drive them out and destroy them quickly, as the LORD has said to you' (Deut.9:3)***

- **When the burnt offering was offered for the sins of Israel the offering was consumed. Likewise, when God's holiness met our sinfulness on the cross it resulted in the death of Jesus**
- **The Hebrews were warned if they continued to reject Jesus they could expect a similar fate, i.e. to be consumed by the fire of God's holiness, *'For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries'* (Heb.10:26-27)**

- **The same fate awaits all who reject Christ,**  
*'...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power'* **(2 Thes.1:7-9)**
- **The fire which will destroy the wicked is the same fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Those living in Sodom are not still alive being tormented, they were destroyed. Note: Peter and Jude both say this is what will happen to the unsaved too:**

- ***'...Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire' (Jude 7)***
- ***'...and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly...'* (2 Pet.2:6)**
- **The following day Abraham observed the smoke from the city which bore witness to its destruction (Isa.34:10; Rev.14:11; 19:3)**



- **John the Baptist said a similar thing, 'His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire' (Matt.3:12)**
- **The Messiah is coming with both salvation and fiery judgment. The Pharisees were like snakes fleeing a grass fire. The fire is unquenchable. It will not stop until all the chaff is burned up**
- **In the Book of Revelation there are only two alternatives: those whose names are in the book of life and those thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death**
- **The first death is that of the body; the second death is that of body and soul. In both cases that which is destroyed stops functioning and ceases to be**

- **Peter also cites the Flood as an example of what will happen at the end of the age:**
- *'For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men' (2 Pet.3:5-7).* **As those in the Flood 'died' and were 'destroyed' (Gen. 6:7, 13, 17; 7:4 7:21-23), so those who reject Christ will be destroyed by fire**
- **After the Flood God said He would not destroy the inhabitants of the earth with a flood as He had done before, Gen.9:11. The meaning of the words 'die', 'perish', 'destroy' are very clear**

- **When the Bible says that the wicked go into eternal punishment this speaks of the *effect*, not the *action*, i.e. the punishment, not the punishing. Six times in the NT the adjective 'eternal' (*aionios*) is used to qualify a noun. These are 'eternal salvation' (Heb.5:9) 'eternal redemption' (Heb.9:12), 'eternal judgment' (Heb.6:2), 'eternal sin' (Mark 3:29), 'eternal punishment' (Matt.25:46), and 'eternal destruction' (2 Thes.1:9). Each one speaks of the result of the action not the action itself. E.g. eternal redemption does not mean that Christ is eternally redeeming us but has done so once and for all and its effects, or results, are eternal. This applies to judgment (one action with eternal consequences), punishment, etc. The condemned are to be judged resulting in their destruction, death, perishing which is irreversible and eternal in the age to come**

- **This allows for suffering prior to or as part of the process of annihilation. God would determine the amount and duration of any suffering, but in the end the person will perish forever and this perishing itself is the main penalty for sin**
- **The only ones who will suffer conscious torment eternally in the lake of fire is Satan and his angels. Remember, it was prepared for them: *'The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever'* (Rev.20:10). (Note: the beast and the false prophet are demonic beings – Rev.17:8; 13:11; 16:13)**

- **Whilst Christ-rejecting humans are cast into the lake of fire their fate is not conscious suffering, but destruction. For this reason those who reject the traditional view of eternal conscious torment are referred to as annihilationists**
- **Another term used for the belief of annihilation for Christ-rejecters is conditional immortality**

- **The Bible teaches that only God inherently has immortality, '...who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen' (1 Tim.6:16)**
- **Adam was given life but was placed on probation in Eden and warned that if he disobeyed God he would 'surely die'**

- **Once he sinned he was not granted access to immortality, otherwise he would have been immortal in the sinful state,**

***'Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life' (Gen.3:22-24)***

- **Immortality is given to those who believe the gospel and receive Christ** *'...has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel'* **(2 Tim.1:10)**
- **This is what Jesus meant in John 6:51,** *'I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever'*
- **And Peter said we have** *'... been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever'* **(1 Pet.1:23)**



- **At the resurrection the saved will be granted total immortality, 'For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory"' (1 Cor.15:52-54)**
- **But the unsaved will perish, 'And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matt.10:28). The same word is used in Matt.8:25, 12:14; 26:52; 27:20; Acts 5:37; 1 Cor.10:9-10; Jude 11. The meaning of this word is clear – they will cease to exist**

- **Peter describes the fate of false teachers,**  
*'...the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment...But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand, and will utterly perish in their own corruption'*

**(2 Pet.2:9,12)**

- **Like animals they act upon fleshly instinct in all their deceptive and immoral ways. Like beasts they will be caught (i.e. their soul will be held in hades) and destroyed in the lake of fire,**

*'...and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire'* **(Rev.20:13-15)**

- **As there is a resurrection to life so others will be raised to face judgment and the second death (Dan.12:2; John 5:29; Rev.20:4-6, 11-15)**
- **As after that 'life' there is no more death, so also after that 'death' there is no more life**
- **Jesus said we are not to fear the death which man can inflict as it is not final, but to fear God because the death He inflicts is for eternity**
- **This does not encourage us to be unconcerned about annihilation. Jesus said, 'Fear Him!'**
- **There will be degrees of suffering inflicted prior to this casting into the fire according to the measure of light each received. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**

### **3) Why has eternal conscious torment been taught for centuries?**

- **The traditionalists teach that whilst the body dies the soul will never die, therefore the unsaved will suffer eternally**
- **What is the basis for their teaching?**
- **This doctrine has no foundation in Jewish theology. It is pagan in origin, taught by the Greek philosophers, spearheaded by Plato who believed the soul existed before it inhabited the body and will outlive the body. In Greek thinking the soul's union with a body was seen as punishment for faults committed during a previous life. The Epicureans were the only Greek philosophers not to believe in the immortality of the soul.**

- **The Church Fathers in general did not believe man's immortality was inherent, but bestowed by God through faith in Christ**
- **But during the 2nd and 3rd centuries some of the Church Fathers who had been converted from pagan philosophy held onto some of their philosophical beliefs, particularly that the human body was mortal but the soul was immortal**
- **Tertullian was one of these and was highly influential in the Church, especially affirming his belief in Plato's teaching that the soul is indestructible**

- **This idea was expanded by Augustine and as a result eternal conscious torment of the soul became orthodox teaching for the Catholic Church throughout the Middle Ages**
- **This view was adopted by the Protestants during the Reformation, especially the Calvinists, though not so much by Lutherans, Anglicans and Anabaptists**
- **William Tyndale and Martin Luther believed that the soul of man was mortal, but because the Anabaptists believed this also, Calvin, who despised the Anabaptists (because they taught believer's baptism and separation of State and Church), strongly opposed it**

- **Calvin, developed the doctrine of eternal conscious suffering further, and...**
- **Eternal conscious torment became the orthodox teaching for the Church after the Reformation until the present time**
- **But how could it be substantiated in view of the Bible teaching we have just observed on this subject?**

- **The two pieces of Scripture most quoted to support this doctrine are the passage about the rich man and Lazarus and some verses from the Book of Revelation, chapters 14 and 20**
- **The context of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk.16:19-31) is covetousness and the Pharisees' tendency to do their own thing regardless of what the law taught (see also His comment on divorce Lk.16:18)**
- **The point is that the Pharisees who were 'lovers of money' would not repent of their covetousness at the teaching of Jesus or Moses and the prophets, nor even if one rose from the dead to warn them. Money was their god**
- **This is the ONLY conclusion Jesus drew**



- **Jesus used the name 'Lazarus' in this parable, because he *would be* raised from the dead and many Jews believed in Him but not the Pharisees, 'Now a great many of the Jews knew that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. But the chief priests plotted to put Lazarus to death also, because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus' (John 12:9-11). See also John 11:45-53**
- **It was not a teaching of life after death**
- **Even if it was meant to refer to life after death it relates to the intermediate state not the eternal state of the ungodly. The rich man was not in Gehenna but in Hades**

**But the eternal torment view appeals mostly to passages in Revelation 14 and 20 for support**

**1) 'Then a third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name"' (Rev.14:9-11)**

- **Note what this says and what it doesn't say. These are standing before the Lamb and the angels on judgment day. This is the Great White Throne judgment, not hell or the lake of fire. They will first suffer being tormented by the holiness of God and then 'slain' (destroyed) 'But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me' (Lk.19:27)**
- **'Tormented' it is the same word used in 2 Pet.2:7-8 '...and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)...'**

- **To drink the cup of God's wrath is to die under His judgment (Obad.16; Jer.25:27, 33)**
- **Jesus, in Gethsemane accepted the cup from God resulting in His death. It necessitated a resurrection to bring Him back from the dead. This is why we drink the cup of wine at communion as a remembrance that He has borne our wrath in dying for us. John consistently upholds this meaning in Revelation 16:19; 18:6; 19:15**
- **Their torment is terminated with death and consumption by fire (Rev.18:7-9)**
- **An angel calls for the birds of prey to consume the flesh of the slain (Rev.19:15-18)**

- **The smoke of their torment and destruction will rise forever. The smoke is a symbol or reminder of their annihilation in a way that a video clip might be a reminder of the destruction of a city. This is Biblical language, found also in the book of Revelation. One day Babylon will be destroyed and its smoke will be a testimony to its destruction. *'Again they said, "Alleluia! Her smoke rises up forever and ever!"'* (Rev.19:3)**
- **We see it too in the example of *Sodom* *'Then he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain; and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace'* (Gen.19:28)**
- **See also Isa.34:10 concerning Edom**

- **The reference to them having no rest day or night is not in eternity but while they are worshipping the Beast. Because they will be smitten with sores, etc. (see Rev.16:12)**
- **Rev.14:11 is present tense. Rev.14:12 proves John is speaking in present tense because the saints are persevering. *'Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus'***

- **2) 'The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever' (Rev.20:10)**
- **This is referring to the devil and his angels, not humans. The fire was prepared for these**
- **The Devil, the Beast (Rev.11:7; 17:8) and the false prophet are essentially spirits (Rev.13:11-17; 16:13; 19:20)**
- **Fire does not affect spirits. E.g. 'And the cherub stretched out his hand from among the cherubim to the fire that was among the cherubim, and took some of it and put it into the hands of the man clothed with linen, who took it and went out' (Ezek.10:7)**

- **These will be tormented forever. But, as we have noted, humans who have rejected Christ will be sent there for destruction not for torment (Rev.20:14-15)**