

## 10. What the Hell? (Heaven and Hell)

Infinite punishment, whereby beings are relentlessly tortured by God without end, is so monstrous and unpalatable that it's often cited by skeptics as a reason for unbelief. Therefore I provide a reasonable alternative.

### Two Major Positions

Although concepts of Hell pervade ancient mythology, instead of suggesting that such a concept is fictitious, it suggests that this concept is common sense. Rejecting the idea of hell altogether disregards justice, having people sinning limitlessly without ever facing God. Hell is not only the grave; Christian scripture has two hells. Sometimes the Greek word Hades, denoting the grave or departed state, is translated into the English word hell. Other times the Greek word gehenna is translated "hell." Gehenna was originally a valley where children were burned alive as sacrifices to the idol Moloch. Since this placed was abhorred, it later became a garbage dump for dead bodies where fires continually burned to quell the ongoing putrefaction.

Since the aforementioned universalism or denial of punishment in the hereafter is completely foreign to Christian history, I shall discuss it no further. However, besides the majority position of infinite punishment, there is Annihilation-ism: the volitionally lost experience hell (gehenna), and suffer the full punishment of their sins, until they're totally consumed, figuratively incinerated.

### Annihilation-ism in the Early Church

Some early Christians were Annihilationists. Renowned early Church Father and Annihilationist Clement I (AD 30-101) had the honor of completing the last section of the *Didache (Apostolic Constitutions)*. These writings claim to have been written by the apostles, specifically stating which apostles wrote them. That demonstrates Clement's intimate fellowship and knowledge of the Apostles. Actually, Clement was Peter's immediate disciple, and Peter ordained him (*Clement's Epistle to James* chapters 1-2). Late-dating the aforementioned writings to the third and fourth centuries would essentially be calling the authors liars. Thankfully, subsequent scholarship espouses first century authorship.

Among earliest writings, the *Apocalypse of Peter* supported Annihilation-ism, and was so popular over several centuries it was almost canonized as Scripture's last book, before John's Apocalypse (or Revelation) won out. Many believe Peter's Apocalypse teaches infinite punishment, with its lurid descriptions of ongoing hellish tortures. But Peter's Apocalypse, which only exists in fragments today (most divergent copies lacked an end), had Jesus revealing Annihilation to Peter at its conclusion. Proof that this work existed by the early second century is its mention by Clement of Alexandria (AD 180) who considered it Holy Scripture.

"It is the Father of all who imparts continuance forever on those who are saved. But he who rejects God's grace deprives himself of continuance forever" (*Irenaeus Against Heresies Book II Chapter XXXIV*; AD 185). Also, "For they [the lost] are cast in, and being annihilated, pass away in everlasting destruction" (*Arnobius Against the Heathen Book II Chapter XIV* AD 300).

### What Popularized Infinite Punishment?

Ideally our motivation to obey God should be great love for Him, but if we cannot muster that, fear of damnation is a great place to start. Precious little is said about hell's termination, souls finding relief, because the point is to drive the fear of God into us.

Numerous early Church Fathers alluded to infinite punishment, but didn't elaborate on it, apparently not fully thinking it through. I cannot fathom anyone deeply contemplating eternal torment without cauterizing their feelings. Furthermore, Hellenism, (Greek culture and philosophy), was a dominant influence throughout the first century world. According to Hellenistic philosophical tradition human souls are inherently immortal, opposed to conditional immortality, that is, true immortality belongs to God alone, who graciously shares His nature as a gift. Hence the first major slide toward Infinite Punishment.

The most prolific writer and arguably greatest among early Church Fathers, Origen (AD 185-254), was an Annihilationist. Unfortunately, he added the extreme notion that Christ Jesus would subsequently return to be crucified a second time for demons and lost men. In apparent reactionary outrage towards his beliefs deemed heretical, at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, Constantinople II, AD 553, Emperor Justinian pronounced a series of condemnations against Origen, including "If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and impious men is only temporary, and that a restoration will take place of demons and impious men, let him be accursed." Since Annihilation-ism and Origen's extraneous ideas became viewed as inextricably linked, naturally people disabused themselves of that. This is the second major turning point.

The third came from Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, 1307-1321.(1) In Dante's Inferno, men are tortured and re-tortured endlessly, like DVD players constantly put on replay. In hell's lowest level, the gigantic Devil, encased waist down in ice, devours frozen men's heads. An earlier version of mythology had in this scenario, Pluto, god of the underworld, in Satan's place. From this source; Infinite Punishment's macabre popularity skyrocketed.

#### Infinite Torture Advocates Attack

Many infinite punishment folks condemn Annihilationists from one reference alone. Scripture does have Jesus using the same word, often translated \*eternal\* to quantify both Heaven's reward and Hell's punishment. Yet in Galatians 6:5 every man shall bear his own burden. But in Matthew 11:29-30, we must bear Christ's burden. So there are different connotations of the same word. Concerning hell lasting "forever," certain aspects of the Old Covenant were also said to last "forever," yet were entirely replaced by the New Covenant. My point is, hanging onto individual words when trying to prove something from Scripture often fails.

Furthermore, I've chosen not to inundate this commentary with a plethora of Scripture quotes, but only use Scripture sparingly. Both camps have quoted barrels of Scripture to mirror their positions, often quoting the exact same verses, tilting each one to reflect their own view.

Some Annihilationists used a poor argument, noting that fire consumes and incinerates, it doesn't endlessly torment its victims. Infinite torture advocates pounced, noting that demons, being bodiless spirits, cannot be hurt by fire. Therefore it cannot be literal, and "Annihilationist heresy is disproved." Not so fast! The lake of fire and brimstone is certainly figurative, couched in terms we can understand. But saying that Almighty God cannot end the existence of any spirit He created is blasphemous.

The logical fallacy of guilt by association is also attempted: Christian infinite torture advocates note that various false teachers and false religions propose Annihilation-ism. This could also backfire, in that all Islamic terrorists believe in infinite punishment. So infinite torture advocates fail to make their case. And since most people believe what they want to believe, I'm wary of those who are adamant about infinite punishment. Perhaps they're secretly cruel and vindictive.

## Annihilation-ism and Logic

My general argument, along with other Christians throughout history, is that Scripture pictures the lost as punished eternally, but not their enduring it. Incurribles suffer eternal punishment by being eternally deprived of Heaven. That's the same way the elect experience eternal redemption; they don't undergo an eternal process of redemption. Destroyed forever or irreparably destroyed, not forever in the process of being destroyed; eternal in that Judgment Day seals one's fate. Besides, finite beings would logically merit finite, not infinite, punishment.

Eastern (or Greek) Orthodoxy (the only major Christian branch utterly devoid of Annihilation-ism) holds the unorthodox notion that hell will consist of God's love relentlessly raining down on those too hard-hearted to receive it, thereby becoming excruciatingly painful. That would give tough love a preposterous new dimension. Rather, God uses tough love, but it serves a purpose, refining one's character. And since narrow is the way to life, wide the way to destruction (Matt.7:13-14), infinite punishment has unrighteousness and misery dwarfing righteousness and bliss for all eternity. Now contrast that with Annihilation-ism, wherein regardless how many lost, and regardless of hell's duration, the time would amount to a teardrop in eternity's ocean, God eventually purifying His universe and fulfilling His joyful purpose.

Moreover, most people wouldn't even want their worst enemy to suffer infinite punishment. Must we suppose that peevish, sinful man is more merciful than God? God forbid. So don't let infinite torture; counterproductive to Christ's message, prevent you from embracing Him.

### Some Musings

Nobody can tell you exactly what "Heaven" or "Hell" will be like. The words themselves are not precise theological terms, but often generic slang terms simply denoting good and bad fates. However, non-Christian ideas of Heaven often involve men being rewarded with endless sexual pleasure or becoming gods over a paradise world. This insinuates that such beliefs are man-made since they cater to men's fleshly desires, while Christian ideas of Heaven involve men being spiritually united with and subservient to God for eternity. Its counterintuitive-ness reflects true spirituality.

Christian scripture is filled with diverse symbolic representations, clearly portraying a future Heaven as wonderful and Hell as terrible; that's all we must know. Perhaps it would be indescribable in this present realm as color is indescribable to someone who was completely colorblind since birth. Perhaps it's not for anyone to know now, since Christianity is based on faith and trust. Demanding that God reveal everything is like an ant demanding that people explain everything to it. For Christians, since JESUS declared the future reality of Heaven and Hell, that settles that.

Since justice is often lacking in the present life, it's logical that punishments be meted out in the future by omniscient, righteous God, who alone knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men. Hardly the result of God's peevishness or pettiness, even existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre stated "Hell is other people."<sup>(2)</sup> One's final destination will have been largely self-created.

Some organizations have adopted a duty to warn policy, a statement that if someone threatens to harm themselves or others, they will be legally apprehended. And with new fire codes, smoke detectors are installed in numerous rooms, which sometimes malfunction and pierce people's eardrums with a deafening shriek. Yet most believers don't warn people about "the eternal fire," while others act completely unconcerned about their spiritual welfare; unbelievable.

Hell will also be eternal separation from humanity, not a consolation prize of forever living with people. Despite artists depicting damned people piled together, everyone will have their own isolated private hell. For the damned, death is the greatest foe.

Paraphrasing theologian D. A. Carson: "Hell" isn't a place where people are consigned because they were pretty good blokes, but they just didn't believe the right stuff. They are consigned,

foremost, because they defy their maker, wanting to be at the center of the universe. “Hell” won’t be filled with people who have already repented, only God isn’t kind enough to let them off. It will be filled with people \*still\* wanting to be at the center of the universe, persisting in their God-defying rebellion. For God to react any other way than to condemn such blatant defiance would be to reduce God Himself.<sup>3</sup>

How can “Heaven” and “Hell” be fixed destinations without contradicting free will? Some choices have permanent consequences, like bringing new life into the world, or murder. Your culmination of bad choices can amount to murdering your soul. Your culmination of good choices can result in permanent godliness, total purity. Such complete incorruption would never choose corruption, like choosing to never eat a rusty tin can instead of a gourmet meal.

No matter who proclaims that most people are Heaven-bound, Jesus clearly stated in Matthew 7:13-14 that narrow is the way to life (Heaven) and wide is the way to destruction (Hell). From a lifetime of personally interacting with people and knowing what constitutes living the Christian life, I speculate that less than one percent of humanity will achieve “Heaven” while the rest choose damnation.

### More Musings

Heaven, Hell’s wonderful opposite, would be eternal intimacy with God. For those destined for Heaven: “This world is the land of the dying; the next is the land of the living” (Tyron Edwards). “Death is not a foe, but an inevitable adventure” (Sir Oliver Ledge). “Death is the golden key which opens the palace of eternity” (Milton). “Death is the crown of life.” (Young) “Death and love are the two wings that bear the good man to heaven” (Michelangelo).<sup>4-8</sup>

However, most people might not even like Heaven, considering it a grotesque amount of religion. Living forever with God would completely countermand most people’s priorities. People constantly talk about business, sports, sex, home remodeling, raising children, cars, and spreading gossip. But focusing on God is “fanatical.” **Why would someone who doesn’t love God become intimately joined with Him, not separated from Him?**

**And why would someone who chooses disconnection from others and doesn’t love them here live with them forever in Heaven?** Besides, Heaven isn’t natural. Those welcomed into Heaven would be loved by God so much that they would live with Him forever. However, we’re not God’s sons and daughters any more than the neighbor’s children are ours; only Jesus Christ is the natural son. Anyone else joining God’s immediate family would be like grafting a branch from a thorn-bush into a pine tree. **Since Christian living consists of imitating God’s qualities, godliness would require loving others who aren’t our blood relatives, specially loving those without an immediate family who need love the most.** Without that, how can anybody achieve Heaven?

Another idea which fosters incredulity and doubt is that of Heaven being extreme infinite pleasure with nothing in between. This is because everyone has both good and bad qualities. Again, there’s strong reason to believe that “Hell” is temporary punishment for unrepentant sinners who won’t seek forgiveness from Christ, nothing more. There is also reason to believe in varying degrees of “Heaven.” Again, Christianity teaches that Heaven is being in God’s presence. Perhaps there are different degrees of His presence. Consider the following analogy:

If God was a star, those who did a splendid job of doing His will throughout their lives might be like an inner planet orbiting the star and receiving its maximum radiance. Those with a passion for God but whose lives were somewhat lacking could be a planet at an average distance, still receiving a healthy amount of radiance. Those whose lives were seriously disordered and whose loyalties were ambivalent, yet whom God still forgives may be likened to a distant planet that receives minimal radiance but is still within the star’s gravitational range. The lost would then be like space debris outside the star’s gravitational pull; hence they float away into outer darkness.

## Doctrinal Baggage

I deny the existence of Hades, its alleged regions Tartarus and Paradise, and deny the existence of a place of Purgatory. However, I believe in Limbo. Limbo consists of people sashaying under a wooden bar that's progressively lowered while music plays. Believing in literal places engenders unbelief, since you must postulate structures made of spirit material or structures in a fourth or fifth dimension. I likewise deny the existence of Hell; I simply believe that Hell will be God's wrath poured out on people and the removal of His life-giving qualities, nothing more. I also deny the existence of Heaven as a specific place presently existing in space. Although John 14:2 usually reads "In my Father's house are many \*mansions\* or \*dwelling places\*", this is better translated \*stations\* (positions of status) per *Tatian's Diatesseron Section XLV*. Instead, I believe that Heaven will be intimate union with God. Believers should reject outdated notions, which suggest cartoon devils poking people with pitchforks in fiery caverns, or winged people sitting on clouds playing harps. We must embrace our scientific age.

Furthermore, going to Paradise, Tartarus, or Purgatory immediately after death contradicts the clear Christian teaching that people will be judged at the world's end when Christ returns, not before. It also violates the clear teaching that the separation of the righteous and unrighteous will come when Christ presides as universal judge. Although some very early Christians held these ideas, they may not have had access to Matthew's gospel and some other scriptures. And the idea of praying souls out of purgatory is nonsensical if God is necessarily purging them from residual sin; it would oppose God. For further discussion, see 8.Ghosts? under Ghost Theology verses Disapproving Christian Believers.

Fallen angels in chains of darkness, the crucified thief going to paradise, and other references could be merely figurative statements signifying individual oppression or happiness. Besides, Revelation 6:9-10 says that some righteous souls are not in blissful Paradise; rather, they cry out in discontent. Christ and His apostles did reveal that spirits don't sleep in their bodies after death, but exit them. However, they didn't reveal what each spirit does afterwards.

### Purgatory Reexamined

There must be some type of purging, unless God intends to forever perpetuate sinful aspects of His people; suffering on Earth alone doesn't purge. And being saved and forgiven is a separate issue. Mass murderers who are saved from the capital punishment they deserve and who are forgiven by their victim's relatives never get out of jail free.

Origen explained that Corinthians 3:10-15 referred to purging from sin. Ministers are the context of chapters 3 and 4, but all believers should minister in some capacity. To avoid the purgatorial implications of verses 11-15 one must butcher the text. Belief in the final purification of Corinthians 3 should also relieve panicky people, who think that they must purify themselves of all sin before they die (although we should try anyway). Simply put, at Judgment everyone will face God's spiritual fire, those who pass the test achieve Heaven, those who fail are damned, and believers who failed in some areas will suffer loss, but survive.

Summarily, every aspect of our lives potentially has eternal consequences. Since our present existence will be over shortly, it's imperative that we're prepared for the afterlife. Considering the deadly seriousness and extreme finality of this subject, we must deeply analyze our lives' direction. As Olympic athletes strive, endure, and sacrifice to attain their goal, so must we who seek God.

