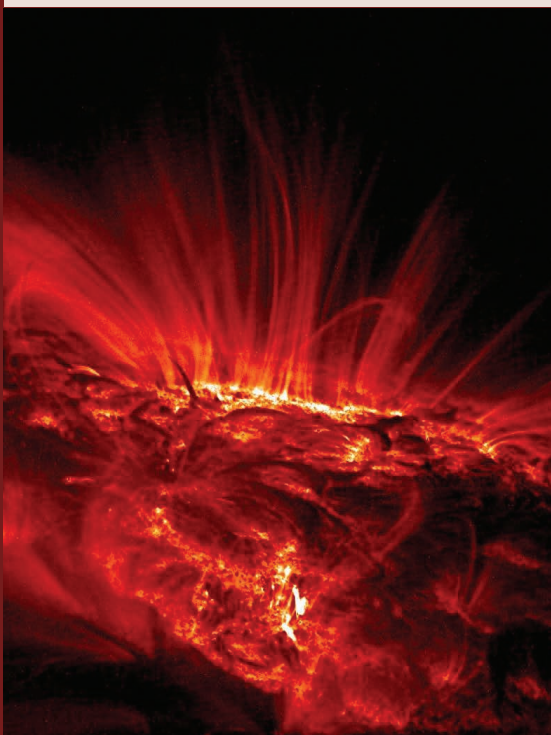




*A Ministry of the  
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

# Will God Punish the Wicked Forever?





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Many Christians believe that a person who dies without Jesus Christ goes to hell at the moment of death to suffer eternally in the fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. An almost indescribable heaviness must be in the minds and hearts of those who believe that their loved ones who did not know the Lord are undergoing the torments of eternal hellfire. This drastic doctrine might offer incentive for a few sinners to seek the Lord, but it has probably turned more people away from God and the Lord Jesus Christ than it has attracted.

The real issue about this doctrine, however, is not how it impacts those who hear it but whether it accurately reflects Holy Scripture. This tract will examine verses often used to support the belief of an everlasting hell, while providing alternative explanations to prove that the suffering of destruction is for a limited period of time. When someone dies without Christ, his or her family may receive some consolation in knowing that the punishment, according to Scripture, lasts only a short time and then ends in eternal nothingness.

The following are three biblical reasons that the fate of sinners will not involve endless agony in a burning hell.

- 1 The belief of eternal torment is incompatible with the overwhelming testimony of Scripture that God is love.
- 2 The few Bible texts that suggest the idea of eternal torment may be understood in ways that do not oppose the idea of a loving God.

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3 Many Bible texts picture the fate of the wicked and unbelievers as having its end in total destruction and eternal death.

## **A loving God**

The belief in eternal torment stands in stark contrast to the fuller and brighter portrait of God painted in the Bible:

But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth (Psalm 86:15; see also Exodus 34:6, 7);

The Lord is very compassionate and merciful (James 5:11);

God is love (1 John 4:8, 16); and

His mercy endures forever (Psalm 136; all 26 verses of this psalm end with the same joyous declaration that the mercy of God, not His anger, never ends). As David also sings, "For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life" (Psalm 30:5).

Many more plain statements of Scripture like these picture God as merciful, loving, kind, good, gentle, and just. God loves all His creatures, and His holiness ensures that He will do what is equitable and right by them, even in exercising His wrath by punishment.

God's nature of love, mercy, and justice does not nullify His promise of punishment for sin: "Though they join forces, the wicked will not go unpunished" (Proverbs 11:21). And Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death." The final judgment of sinners will result in their death and destruction. Indeed, it may be seen as an expression of love that God will give the wicked the freedom

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from God they have always wanted. He will not forever allow the evildoer to continue wreaking havoc among His redeemed creatures or in His restored creation.

The belief of eternal torment assigns to God attitudes and actions that can never truly be described as loving, merciful, or just. It says that our gracious, long-suffering God has planned the horrific anguish of human beings for ages without end.

To plan the perpetual suffering of others is neither love nor mercy. To condemn any person to infinite punishment for finite sins is not justice.

Considering the big picture of God in Scripture, it is illogical and impossible to endorse the idea of eternal torment for anyone. Beyond this, it is unnecessary to do so from any single Bible text. Those passages often quoted to support the teaching of an eternal hell may easily be understood in a different sense.

## **Better explanations**

Proponents of eternal torment often give a handful of Bible verses to support their convictions. But is the meaning given for these verses the proper one? Is there a better interpretation that harmonizes with God's character of mercy and justice, while not violating the context or the content of these passages?

- The first three Gospels speak of everlasting fire and punishment, of a fire that is not quenched:

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He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17; cf. Mark 9:48).

“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire . . . these will go away into everlasting punishment . . .” (Matthew 25:41, 46).

A quick reading of these texts may seem to support the traditional view of hell as a place of eternal torment, but please note: The fire that will destroy, or “burn up,” the wicked may be described as everlasting and unquenchable simply because it cannot be extinguished. That is, it will not cease to burn until its work of death and destruction is complete.

An unquenchable fire that utterly destroys may burn itself out. Jeremiah 17:27 foretells an unquenchable fire that would burn in the gates of Jerusalem during his day. It burned only a short while, until its work was done. In the same sense, the now non-existent fires that fully consumed Sodom and Gomorrah are described as “eternal fires” in Jude 7.

*The everlastingness of the punishment accurately describes the fire’s effect, not its duration.*

The final punishment for sin is annihilation, death from which there is no return. Thus, the punishment is everlasting, but the punishing is not. “‘And the day which is coming shall burn them up,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘That will leave them neither root nor branch. . . . You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet . . .’” (Malachi 4:1, 3). Indeed, it is



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peculiar to suggest, as the eternal torment position does, that God's everlasting fire *will not* consume and destroy (2 Thessalonians 1:8, 9; Hebrews 12:29).

None of these verses provide compelling evidence that sinners will be tormented for eternity.

- In Mark 9:43-48, Jesus refers to a fire that is not quenched. This passage differs from the ones above in that the word *hell* is also used. For example, "It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched — where 'Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" This is repeated twice more in the same text. How should one understand such a vivid warning and strange expression?

The Bible offers no support for the idea that the "worm" of this text refers to human consciousness or the human soul. Further, the Greek word for *hell* in this passage, and others in the New Testament, is *Gehenna*. It refers directly to the Jerusalem city dump in Bible times, a place where the ever-smoldering flames and the ever-present worms eventually destroyed or consumed everything cast into it.

Jesus' remarks here are taken from Isaiah 66:24: "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 bodies of the condemned were cast into the city dump, where they were completely

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destroyed by fire, decomposition, and worms.

In summary, Jesus uses Old Testament imagery to warn those who persist in sin, and He adds a graphic analogy of Gehenna — the city garbage pit where nothing lives except fire and worms — to describe the final destruction of the wicked.

- Another text often cited to support an everlasting, burning hell is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Taken literally, the story would teach that

1. Abraham's bosom is the home of the righteous (v. 22);
2. The wicked dead undergo burning torment (vv. 23, 24);
3. Souls in torment can see the righteous in their eternal dwelling (v. 23);
4. Communication occurs between Abraham and those in the burning fire (vv. 24-31).

Considering the symbolic nature of at least three of these elements, this parable was obviously not intended to be read literally. What then is its meaning?

In context, Jesus tells the story because the Pharisees ridiculed Him and His teaching that man cannot serve both God and money (vv. 13, 14). Jesus' judgment of their attitude is "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts" (v. 15). He then uses the parable to illustrate their hypocrisy and the reality of reversed fortune that will someday come between those who trust in riches and those who trust only in God.

Jesus' ministry constantly fulfilled "Moses

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and the prophets,” yet the Pharisees jeopardized their future by ignoring His words and by rejecting Him after His death and resurrection. The folly of their refusal is one important lesson of the parable, not a way of describing hell and heaven within sight of each other, with the lost and the redeemed conversing.

- The book of Revelation contains language some use to press the idea of never-ending suffering for the wicked. Please note who will experience what in these verses.

One passage says of anyone who worships the beast “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 . . .” (14:10b, 11). Another passage says of the Devil, the beast, and the false prophet, “They will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10b).

The Bible’s last book is filled with imagery and symbolism, making it a minefield for over-zealous but ill-informed students who insist on literal meanings. For example, the verse fragments just quoted use the words *fire*, *brimstone*, *Lamb*, *smoke*, and *beast* — all of which may have been intended symbolically, not literally.

Further, these verses contain a clear echo of Isaiah 34:9, 10: “Its [Edom’s] streams shall be turned into pitch, and its dust into brimstone; its land shall become burning pitch! It will not be quenched night or day; its smoke shall ascend forever.” This passage

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refers to an event that occurred hundreds of years before Christ and had long since disappeared. Both Isaiah 34 and its counterpart in Revelation contain poetic language to emphasize the totality and irreversibility of the degradation sinners will endure, not its eternal duration.

Notice how these punishments are described as producing death: “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” (Revelation 21:8).

But what about Satan? Will he not suffer throughout eternity in hell? Bible students are aware that “forever and ever” in some texts means merely “as long as the thing shall last.” For example, Exodus 21:5, 6 and Jonah 2:5, 6 refer to forever as either a lifetime or no more than three days and nights. Even the phrase “day and night forever and ever” is not a literal description of eternity (which will have no night) but a poetic way of saying that Satan will never be restored from his banishment and destruction.

What Jesus accomplished by sharing in humanity was “that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14b).

Given the less hideous explanations available for each of the texts above, how can those who know of God’s infinite and unfathomable love continue to defend the teaching of eternal torment?

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## More conclusive texts

The larger share of Bible texts that address the fate of the wicked speak with a note of finality about the punishment ahead. Unrepentant sinners will come to their appointed end: death, destruction, and annihilation.

Notice the words used in the following texts dealing with God's final judgment:

Hebrews 10:27: Fiery indignation will devour the adversaries.

Philippians 3:19: Their end is destruction.

John 3:16: "Whoever believes in Him should not perish," implying that unbelievers will perish.

Ezekiel 18:4: The soul who sins shall die.

Malachi 4:1-3: The wicked shall be burned up, leaving neither root nor branch — only ashes under foot.

Psalms 1:4: The wicked are blown away like chaff.

Proverbs 10:25: The wicked are no more.

Psalms 37:22, 28, 34, 38: The wicked shall be cut off.

Psalms 37:20: "The wicked shall perish . . . into smoke they shall vanish away."

Psalms 37:36: The wicked cannot be found.

Job 11:20: The wicked "shall not escape, and their hope — loss of life!"

Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

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Now consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:28b: “Fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [or Gehenna].” Traditional religious teaching says that every human has an immortal soul that can never be destroyed. Christ says, however, that God is able to destroy the soul also, after which the person will be as if he had never been (see Obadiah 16b). The conclusion is that God is not just able to destroy but will destroy both the soul and body of the wicked.

The picture is becoming clear of what lies ahead for unbelieving sinners: the finality of separation, desolation, destruction, death, annihilation, nonexistence. The wicked do not inherit an eternity of living torment. They perish!

Seldom does Scripture refer to the instrument that God will use to destroy the wicked as hell. This word in English translations usually refers either to the grave (the place of the dead) or to Gehenna (the Jerusalem garbage pit where refuse was burned by fire or eaten by worms).

Instead of hell, God’s plan for the destruction of sinners at the final judgment is called the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8). This is God’s “strange” work — strange compared to His proper work of salvation — and He will “cut it short in righteousness” (compare Isaiah 28:21, 22 with Romans 9:28).

It is a mistake to establish a belief like eternal torment from the doubtful interpretation of a few verses. Rather, one should let the clear verses regarding the fate of sinners speak for themselves. A person need not

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impugn God's character by teaching such a ghastly outcome for sinners when God has made His merciful and righteous judgment so plain.

Still, that merciful and righteous judgment will not be pleasant, and it will be avoided only by following God's plan of salvation. A major aspect regarding the punishment of the wicked and unbelievers is that they will miss out on eternal fellowship with God, loved ones, and the saints of God. Their remembrance will fade away, even as their lives. Eternal life and an abode in God's eternal kingdom will be awarded only to the faithful who trust, confess, and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

## **Unbiblical assumption**

The belief of eternal punishment is based on the assumption that humans have an immortal soul. However, such a theory has no biblical basis. God alone possesses immortality, according to 1 Timothy 6:15b, 16. The only human immortality and eternal life known in Scripture come as the gift of God through the gospel of Christ: "[God's purpose] has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has . . . brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10; cf. Romans 6:23).

(For a fuller treatment of conditional immortality, see our gospel pamphlet *Death and Immortality*.)

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## Positive vs. negative motivation

When considering eternal “hellfire and brimstone” to induce sinners to repent and trust Jesus as Savior and Lord, we should evaluate the likely effect of such tactics. The best persuasion to trust and obey the Lord does not focus on a threat of punishment. The most effective motivation for faith and repentance springs from God’s love, not His wrath: “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

God would not likely use the warning of suffering to coerce His creatures, those to whom He had given the right to choose life or death. Luke 14:26-31 teaches us to count the cost of giving up life’s sinful pleasures to gain the pleasures of God’s kingdom. Logically, a person should count the cost of not accepting God’s salvation. However, it is not right to overstate that cost by spinning horror stories of eternal torment.

Positive, productive motivation includes the desire to know God and be known by Him, the opportunity for loving relationships, and the possibility of reward. Influenced by these ideas, a person does things because he or she wants to, not because he or she feels coerced. God showers a person with these positive motivations through His Word, His Spirit, and the loving witness of Christian people.

Negative motivation, on the other hand, is heavy with fear, guilt, and threat. This may be effective for short periods, but it commonly has little lasting effect.

Is there room for a holy fear of God? Of course there is. This is needed today more



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than ever. One should be taught early in life to develop a healthy respect for the judgment seat of God. The Scriptures say, “The Lord will judge His people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:30, 31) and “Our God is a consuming fire” (12:29).

However, it is neither biblical nor rational that the threat of suffering should be the strongest motivation to be saved. The loving appeal of Jesus Christ in the gospel, driven home to the heart by the Holy Spirit, prompts and plants genuine faith and hope.

The goodness of God — not an exaggerated view of His wrath — leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:32). How much less would He be pleased to give them everlasting life in torment!

To sum up the matter, yes, God will punish the wicked with destruction. But no, He will not torment them for eternity.



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