

Hell

**The Final Destination:
For Unbelievers**

By

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The Final Destination For Unbelievers

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The Final Destination For Unbelievers

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About The Author

THE AFTERLIFE SERIES

Hell
The Final Destination
For Unbelievers
(Volume 5 of 5)

We now arrive at the last book in our series on the afterlife, the subject of hell.

In our first book, we looked at the subjects of death and dying, and then how we should live in the light of the eternity we are all facing.

In our second volume, we considered what happens to us one second after we die. We discovered what the Bible had to say about the condition of each of us immediately after our death.

Our third book covered the subjects of the resurrection of the dead and the coming biblical judgments. We found that Scripture teaches that human beings will be raised from the dead and then judged.

In our fourth volume, we looked at the subject of the final destination of those who believe in the God of the Bible. Scripture says that when believers die in Jesus Christ, they go to be with the Lord in a place called heaven. We discovered what the Bible had to say about the future home of believers

This last book in our series deals with the difficult topic of hell. We will answer such questions as: Is there really a place called hell? Who goes there? Why do people have to go to hell? And how can a person avoid going to hell?

We will look at these, as well as other related questions about the final state of the wicked, as we wrap up our series on the afterlife.

While this is the longest book in our series, we realize that much more could be said about this subject. Indeed, there are many questions concerning this topic that can be further developed. If necessary, in the future, we will go into additional detail on this most difficult of subjects.

Question 1

Why Would Anyone Want To Study The Subject Of Hell?

Before we begin our look at the subject of hell, there is a very important question that we must first answer: why in the world would anyone want to study this subject? Indeed, the idea of a “hell” is so repulsive that many people do not even want to think about it, much less study about it. So why should we do it?

In truth, there are at least five basic reasons as to why we should study the subject of hell. They can be listed as follows.

Reason 1: The Subject Of Hell Is Taught In The Bible

First, the subject of hell is taught in Holy Scripture. That, by itself, should be a sufficient reason to study it.

Indeed, we are told that “all Scripture” is “God’s Word” and is profitable to study. The Apostle Paul wrote the following to Timothy:

Everything in the Scriptures is God’s Word. All of it is useful for teaching and helping people and for correcting them and showing them how to live. The Scriptures train God’s servants to do all kinds of good deeds (2 Timothy 3:16,17 CEV).

The New International Version puts it this way:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16,17 NIV).

Everything contained in Scripture is useful. Therefore, since the subject of hell is taught in the Word of God, it is important that Christians understand what the Bible has to say about it.

Furthermore, Jesus talked about “hell,” the final place of God’s punishment of the wicked, more than He talked about heaven. This fact alone emphasizes the importance of the subject, as well as the necessity to study it.

Reason 2: Bible-Believing Christians Have Different Viewpoints About Hell

This leads us to the next reason as to why we should study about hell. It is an issue where Bible-believers, when they examine the Scripture, differ, in some respects, about this controversial topic.

Indeed, some see hell as a temporary place of punishment for unbelievers. They contend that the unrighteous will eventually be annihilated. In other words, they will cease to exist, as will hell.

Others believe that there is no ongoing punishment whatsoever for the wicked. Once they are raised from the dead and judged they are immediately annihilated.

There are others who think that once people suffer sufficiently in hell they will then go to heaven. That viewpoint makes hell something like a purgatory.

Still others, holding the historical view, see hell as a place of everlasting conscious punishment for the wicked, a place from where there is no escape.

In another matter, some Bible-believers think the fire in hell is literal while others believe it is only symbolic. Again, we find Christians differing on the exact type of punishment that unbelievers will experience in hell.

These are some of the many questions which Christians debate about hell.

Consequently, it is important that we understand the various viewpoints about hell that are held by Bible-believers.

Reason 3: We Need A Biblical Understanding Of Hell

Since hell is taught in the Bible, and Bible-believers differ on how to understand the topic, we need to know what Scripture have to say. Consequently, we must be willing to look at the totality of the “biblical evidence.” Simply put, when we do this, here is what we find.

The Bible clearly says that humanity is divided into two different groups: the saved and the lost. There is no third category. Those who have believed in the God of the Bible will be forever in His presence. Those who have rejected Him will be sent to a place called the lake of fire, hell.

In describing the Holy City in eternity, the New Jerusalem, we read the following:

Blessed are those who wash their robes. They will be permitted to enter through the gates of the city and eat the fruit from the tree of life. Outside the city are the dogs—the sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idol worshipers, and all who love to live a lie (Revelation 21:14,15 NLT).

The righteous are inside of the Holy City, the unrighteous are outside, they are in hell. This is the clear teaching of the Bible.

This brings up a number of questions. For those outside of the Holy City, is their punishment in hell eternal, as well as conscious? Or will God

eventually annihilate these wicked people? Will the unrighteous ultimately end up in heaven after they are sufficiently punished?

To answer these questions, we must go to the Scripture, and to it alone. Once we determine what the Word of God has to say on the subject of hell, we should then be willing to face the truth and live accordingly.

Reason 4: There Are Many Misconceptions About Hell That Need To Be Cleared Up

Another reason to study this subject is to clear up the many misconceptions surrounding it. In fact, if there is one subject where misconceptions abound, it is the subject of hell.

Misconception 1: Hell Is A Product Of The Dark Ages

The idea of hell has been caricatured by people as something that belongs to the distant past. Indeed, most people think it is a relic of the dark ages. Modern enlightened humans do not even consider the biblical view of hell as a possibility.

This is tragic. The Bible says that God's eternal Word stands firm in the heavens. The psalmist wrote:

Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens (Psalm 119:89 NIV).

Hell is not something of a bygone era, a product of ignorance and superstition. It is the everlasting teaching of the Living God recorded in His Holy Word.

Misconception 2: Hell Is Where God Tortures People

A study of Scripture will show that hell, though a place of punishment, is not a place of torture. As we will discover, unbelievers are punished for their sins, but they are not tortured. Therefore, it is a misconception to think that the Lord has prepared some kind of eternal torture chamber for the lost. He has not.

Reason 5: Studying The Subject May Keep Some People From Going To Hell

Finally, it is our goal for people to take the doctrine of hell seriously. In fact, there are many individuals who have put their faith in Jesus Christ once they understand the consequences of rejecting Him. Indeed, they realize what is at stake, their eternal destiny:

The one who believes in the Son has eternal life. The one who rejects the Son will not see life, but God's wrath remains on him (John 3:36 NET).

Therefore, we have two possible destinies, eternal life in the Son, or God's wrath in hell.

For these five reasons, as well as many others, the subject of hell should be seriously studied.

A Biblical Illustration Of The Importance: The Rich Man In Hades

We also have a very practical illustration, from Scripture, of the importance of studying the subject of hell.

In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus gave a story of a rich man who died and was sent to Hades, the unseen realm of the unrighteous dead. He was not in hell, but in a temporary place of punishment, on his way to hell. The Lord explained his situation in this manner:

In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire' (Luke 16:22-24 NIV).

There are a number of things we learn at the outset. First, this man was conscious in the realm of the dead. Not only was he conscious, he was in torment. Seeing Abraham, along with the former beggar Lazarus, he called out for pity, for mercy, for this man was in agony in this fiery torment. To sum up, his suffering was real, it was agonizing, and it was ongoing.

There Was No Help For Him

We also learn that there was no help for this unrighteous man in Hades. The Bible records Abraham, the father of the faithful, saying these words to the man:

But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us' (Luke 16:25-26 NIV).

Abraham recognized that the rich man was in agony. However, he was beyond help. Indeed, nobody could ever help him again. His destiny was forever set, there was no crossing over from one side to the next because a great chasm separated the two.

The Man Wanted To Warn The Living

Realizing this, the man in Hades wanted those who were still alive to be warned of this dreadful place. He said the following:

Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment. Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ “No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’ (Luke 16:27-31 NIV).

This last lesson we learn is the most important. The man wanted Lazarus sent back to his family to warn them of this place of torment that awaited them, if they did not change their ways. However, there would be no return of Lazarus, they did not need a message coming from someone in the realm of the dead. Instead, they needed to heed the teaching of the Word of God!

This same lesson applies to us today. Those who are living need to hear the message of Jesus Christ, which is recorded in the Word of God, the Bible. In doing so, they will discover that there is indeed a heaven, and there is a hell. Jesus Christ died so that none of us will have to go to hell. Ultimately, it is our choice as to where we will go. This is the message which everyone needs to hear.

It is our responsibility to proclaim this message. This is why the subject of hell must be addressed.

Summary To Question 1: Why Would Anyone Want To Study The Subject Of Hell?

The subject of hell, the final punishment for wicked humanity, is a topic that most people do not like to think of, or investigate. Yet it is important that we do so for the following reasons.

First, the subject of hell is taught in the Word of God. That alone makes it important for us to study. In point of fact, Jesus Christ spoke more about hell than He did about heaven.

Second, Christians have a number of differing views on the subject. Indeed, they debate such things as the duration of hell, whether people in hell will eventually cease to exist, as well as the idea that everyone will eventually end up in heaven after suffering a certain amount of time in hell.

Third, since we have these disputes among believers, it is important that we discover what the Word of God has to say about the matter. It is our final authority on the issue. Indeed, it is our only authority!

Fourth, understanding the biblical position on hell will clear up the misconceptions that people have about this subject. Unfortunately, there are many.

Fifth, when the biblical doctrine of hell is understood, it can cause those who are apart from Jesus Christ to trust Him as Savior. In fact, when they understand what is at stake, a conscious eternity in one of two places, it makes their options clear.

A final motivation for studying this subject is found in the story Jesus told of two people who had died, the rich man and Lazarus. From His account, we find that the unbelievers who have died do not go out of existence. Rather they are experiencing ongoing suffering in the unseen realm of the dead.

As the rich man was quoted in the story, it is important that the living understand what will happen to people once this life is over. They must appreciate the fact that their eternal destiny is determined in this life, and in it alone. Once life is over, eternity is fixed forever. Therefore, the time to believe in the Lord is now!

Finally, the only source which gives us the correct information about the destiny of humanity is found in the Word of God. Consequently, it must be believed and studied.

Accordingly, this should give us the motivation to tell others that they do not have to go to this place of punishment. Indeed, salvation from hell is available through Jesus Christ!

In sum, there are many good reasons as to why we should study the subject of hell.

Question 2

Does The Old Testament Teach That The Wicked Will Be Punished In The Afterlife?

The idea that God will punish the wicked in the next world has always been a subject of controversy. Hell is one of the first doctrines of the Christian faith that is rejected by unbelievers. It is relegated to the realm of mythology. Indeed, it is thought to be a relic of a time when people had a more primitive, superstitious view of God and the world. Supposedly, we now know better.

The Bible Says The Wicked Will Be Punished In The Next World

Will God judge the wicked and then punish them in the afterlife? The Bible gives a definite answer of “yes” to the question. God’s judgment does not consist of words only, it is not just a mere formality. Indeed, there is a real and terrible punishment to follow for those who do not believe in Him through His Son, Jesus Christ.

We will begin looking at what the Old Testament says about the destiny of the unrighteous. In the following questions, we will examine what was believed between the testaments about the destiny of the wicked, what the four gospels had to say about the subject, as well as what the books of the New Testament, apart from the gospels, tell us about the ultimate destiny of the wicked.

This will give us a general overview of the subject, from the very beginning of biblical history through the New Testament era. We will then summarize what we have found.

The Old Testament Taught The Wicked Would Be Punished In The Afterlife

The Old Testament contains little information about the future of the ungodly. Indeed, most of the statements about the afterlife concern the believers, not the unbelievers. However, it does speak of the future judgment of the wicked. There are two passages which we need to consider.

First, the Book of Isaiah ends with these solemn words about the fate of the wicked:

For just as the new heavens and the new earth I am about to make will remain standing before me,” says the Lord, “so your descendants and your name will remain. From one month to the next and from one Sabbath to the next, all people will come to worship me,” says the Lord. They will go out and observe the corpses of those who rebelled against me, for the maggots that eat them will not die, and the fire that consumes them will not die out. All people will find the sight abhorrent (Isaiah 66:22-24 NET).

God ends the Book of Isaiah by making promises to the people of Israel. Indeed, they will remain forever just as the new heavens and new earth which He will make:

The righteous will observe the dead bodies of the wicked. We are told that the maggots who eat these bodies will not die and the fire that burns them will not die out.

Of course, there is no such thing as an eternal fire or undying maggots in our present world. Consequently, this is the first indication in the Old Testament of some type of punishment of the wicked in the afterlife.

As we will discover, this picture of the future state of the wicked is further developed in the New Testament. Yet, in this first example, this description sets the stage for what the rest of the Bible teaches about their eternal destiny.

The Dead Will Awake To Everlasting Disgrace

In the Book of Daniel, we are given further information about the fate that the unrighteous. Indeed, we are told that they will awake from sleep, namely death, to everlasting disgrace, or contempt:

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2 NIV).

There are two destinies. The righteous arise to everlasting life but the wicked will one day be raised from the dead, and then judged by the Lord. They will then be punished. Their punishment will consist of shame and everlasting disgrace.

Observations On Old Testament Teaching Of The Destiny Of The Wicked

From the Old Testament, we find that the wicked will be punished in the afterlife. The nature of the punishment is not specified for us. In other words, if all we had was the Hebrew Scriptures, one could argue that the dead would be raised, judged, and then annihilated. However, the pictures that are given to us, by these two prophets, are also consistent with idea of the everlasting punishment for the wicked.

The New Testament will give us a more complete picture as to what happens to the unrighteous in the afterlife. From it, we will have a better understanding of the eternal destiny of the wicked.

Before we examine the New Testament, we will observe what some of those who lived between the testaments believed about the ultimate fate of the wicked.

Summary To Question 2
Does The Old Testament Teach That The Wicked
Will Be Punished In The Afterlife?

One of the most controversial doctrines in the entire Bible, if not the most controversial, concerns the destiny of the wicked in the afterlife, the doctrine of hell. Though many people deny it, the Bible says that the unrighteous will be punished in the next world. Indeed, the idea of the final punishment of the wicked is a theme which is found in both testaments.

From the Old Testament, we find this taught in the writings of the prophet Isaiah, as well as in the Book of Daniel.

After speaking of the future of the righteous in a new heaven and a new earth, Isaiah wrote of the time when they would view undying maggots eating the bodies of the evil dead. He also said these dead bodies would burn with a fire that would never go out. But how could a body not be consumed if continually burned and eaten by maggots? Certainly it cannot happen in this world. The “how” is not explained for us in the Old Testament.

However, this verse will be developed in the New Testament as the destiny of the unrighteous is further explained.

Daniel wrote of a time the dead would be awakened from sleep, namely death, and then sent away to everlasting shame. Thus, the dead are raised, judged and then punished for eternity. Yet the nature of their punishment is not described.

In sum, what we have in the Old Testament is incomplete. While it does speak of some type of punishment for the wicked, the exact nature of this punishment is not defined for us. As we will see, the New Testament, however, does clarify and expand on what the Old Testament says.

Before we examine what the New Testament says, in our next question, we will briefly look at some of the views of the destiny of the lost that were held by those living between the testaments.

Question 3

What Did Those Who Lived Between The Testaments Believe About The Fate Of The Wicked?

The divine revelation from God ceased for a time with the last book of the Old Testament. Indeed, there is a four-hundred-year gap between the last book of the Hebrew Scripture and the beginning of the New Testament era.

While the four-hundred-year period between the testaments was a time without divine revelation, it was not a time when all writing ceased. Consequently, it is helpful to discover what those who lived between the testaments believed about the destiny of the wicked. Though what they wrote is not Holy Scripture, it is useful to see how they understood what the Old Testament taught about the fate of the unrighteous.

What we will find is that there were people who saw everlasting conscious punishment in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. While this was not the only way in which these passages were interpreted by those living between the testaments, it is interesting to find that many did indeed believe this is what the Scriptures were teaching.

The Book Of Judith

In a book written between the testaments, the Book of Judith, we find the following statement about the fate of the wicked:

Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment; he will send fire and worms into their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever (Judith 16:17 NRSV)

According to this verse, the writer assumed that those nations who fought against God's people, Israel, would spend eternity in a place of fire where they would suffer in pain forever. This builds upon what Daniel and Isaiah wrote. Actually, it echoes the words of the last verse in the Book of Isaiah:

And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind (Isaiah 66:24 NIV).

Accordingly, it seems that the writer of Judith interpreted these words of Isaiah as saying that the fires of hell would burn the inhabitants forever, yet without consuming them.

In other words, they would suffer pain forever. As we will discover, this is consistent with the New Testament position on the destiny of the wicked.

The Pharisees Of Jesus Day Believed In An Everlasting Hell

We also find that one sect of the religious rulers, the Pharisees, believed in an everlasting punishment for the wicked. First century writer Flavius Josephus wrote the following about their belief:

Every soul is imperishable, but that only those of the righteous pass into another body, while those of the wicked are, on the contrary, punished with eternal torment (Josephus Wars of the Jews, 2.8.14).

They [the Pharisees] hold the belief that an immortal strength belongs to souls, and that there are beneath the earth punishments and rewards for those who in life devoted themselves to virtue or vileness, and that eternal imprisonment is appointed for the latter, but the possibility of returning to life for the former (Josephus Antiquities 18.1.3)

It is important to realize that this particular group of religious leaders held to this belief, that of an everlasting punishment of the wicked, before Jesus appeared on the scene. Seemingly, they derived this belief from passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, as did the writer of the Book of Judith.

Gehenna

As we will develop in a later question, Gehenna, the valley of Hinnom, was the illustration that Jesus used to depict the ultimate destiny of the wicked. This same picture was also used during the period between the testaments. This location outside of the city of Jerusalem was seen as a place of punishment where the fires would burn the unrighteous.

It Was Not A Garbage Dump

Contrary to what is often stated about Gehenna, there does not seem to be any convincing evidence that, at the time of Christ, it was used a garbage dump where the fires perpetually burned the rubbish. In fact, the proper explanation for the fires of Gehenna does not seem to be that of burning trash dump.

The prophet Jeremiah recorded the Lord making following prediction about the future of this awful place:

They have also built places of worship in a place called Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom so that they can sacrifice their sons and daughters by fire. That is something I never commanded them to do! Indeed, it never even entered my mind to command such a thing! So, watch out!” says the Lord. “The time will soon come when people will no longer call those places Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom. But they will call that valley the Valley of Slaughter and they will bury so many people in Topheth they will run out of room” (Jeremiah 7:31,32 NET).

The place where child sacrifices were previously performed will be the place where the wicked will be slaughtered.

Gehenna, therefore, came to represent the place where the unrighteous are eternally punished.

In sum, there were people who lived between the testaments that believed that the everlasting fate of the wicked was eternal conscious punishment.

This set the stage for Jesus' teachings on the subject of the afterlife, including the destiny of the wicked dead. Since Christ is the final authority on all matters which He addresses, we look to Him for the ultimate answers on this subject.

Summary To Question 3

What Did Those Who Lived Between The Testaments Believe About The Fate Of The Wicked?

Though the four-hundred-year period between the end of the Old Testament era, and the beginning of the New Testament age was without divine revelation, we do discover certain beliefs that the people had about the afterlife during this time.

Building upon what was written in Isaiah, we find in the Book of Judith the belief that the wicked would be subject to everlasting fire where they would suffer pain for all eternity. This is consistent with what the Old Testament taught, though briefly, about the condition of the wicked in the afterlife.

One sect of the religious leaders, the Pharisees, also held to the doctrine of everlasting punishment of the wicked. This belief was embraced by the group before the time of Jesus.

Gehenna, the valley outside of Jerusalem which was used for the horrific child sacrifices in the Old Testament, became a symbol of the final punishment of the wicked. It was viewed as a place where individuals would suffer a fiery punishment for all eternity.

With this background in mind, we can next examine what the four gospels have to say about the destiny of the wicked dead.

Indeed, God the Son, Jesus Christ, came into our world to explain what God is like, as well as to tell us His plan for humanity, for both time and eternity.

Therefore, it is absolutely essential that we discover what Christ taught about the destiny of the wicked, since He is the "last word" on every subject in which He speaks.

Question 4

What Do The Four Gospels Say About The Destiny Of The Wicked?

As we have observed in our two previous questions, the Old Testament, as well as some of those who lived between the testaments, taught an everlasting punishment for the unrighteous. However, as we noted, only a few facts about their destiny were revealed in the Old Testament Scripture.

The New Testament continues the theme of the punishment for the wicked in the next life. In this particular question, we will look at what the four gospels have to say about the subject of the eternal destiny of the wicked with the testimony of John the Baptist and Jesus.

John The Baptist

First, we want to look at what John the Baptist said concerning the fate of the unrighteous. We read in Matthew concerning what took place when John was baptizing:

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. “You brood of snakes!” he exclaimed. “Who warned you to flee God’s coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire (Matthew 3:7-12 NLT).

We discover a number of things from these verses about the destiny of the unrighteous. To begin with, we find that John stated that God’s wrath would come upon the wicked. In fact, one of the parties he was addressing, the Pharisees, held a similar view of the destiny of the unrighteous. As we noted in the last question, they believed in the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked.

Shockingly, John warned them that they would suffer the wrath of God if they did not repent of their sins!

In his warning, John compared the fate of the wicked to the chaff which burns with never-ending fire. John, therefore, symbolically described God separating the true and the false, the believers and the unbelievers, in a future judgment which would result in their fiery punishment, a fire that would never be extinguished.

This view of John, of the fate of the wicked, is consistent with what the Old Testament taught, as well as how some interpreted it during the period between the testaments, including the Pharisees.

What Did Jesus Teach About The Destiny Of The Wicked?

The big question, of course is this: what did Jesus Christ think about the everlasting destiny of the wicked? Did He teach that there would be ongoing punishment for the wicked in the afterlife? What exactly did Christ tell us?

Since Jesus, as God the Son, is the “last word” on every subject in which He addresses, it is vital that we discover how Christ viewed the issue of the future destiny of the wicked.

Preliminary Observation: We Need To Let Christ Tell Us What He Thought About This Subject

Before we look at what Jesus had to say about the destiny of the unrighteous, there is a preliminary matter that must be addressed. Indeed, we cannot emphasize this point enough: we need to let Jesus tell us what He thought of the ultimate destiny of the wicked!

Too often, we find people saying what “they believe” Jesus would say, or what He would not say, on the subject of the destiny of the unrighteous. Indeed, we read statements such as “Jesus would never teach the everlasting punishment of the wicked” or “the love of Jesus would not allow such a place as hell to exist,” etc. In other words, they settle the issue before even looking at what Jesus actually said.

This is the wrong way to approach this question. To the point, we must let the Lord Jesus tell us God’s perspective on the subject! Indeed, for the believer, to ignore or deny what the Bible teaches on any subject, particularly the eternal destiny of the wicked, is a dangerous matter.

Since it is crucial that we know what Christ actually taught on this issue, we will take a comprehensive look at what Jesus said about the fate of the wicked after this life is over. The evidence is as follows.

Jesus Clearly Taught About The Future Of The Wicked In The Afterlife, There Is A Hell

It may be surprising to some people that the fullest and clearest teaching on the subject of hell, God’s future punishment of the wicked, is by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Christ, in fact, spoke more of the sorrows of hell than He did of the joys of heaven. Jesus spoke of the punishment of the wicked in both direct sayings and parables.

What we will find in Jesus’ teachings is consistent with the Old Testament Scripture, as well as the belief of the Pharisees, and that which John the Baptist warned the people of.

In other words, we have unswerving teaching on this subject from Scripture, as well as from those who interpreted it.

We will examine Jesus' statements about everlasting punishment as recorded in each of the four gospels and then summarize what we find.

Matthew

The gospel of Matthew provides us with the most references to the eternal destiny of the wicked from the words of Jesus. From it, we learn many things from the Lord about the conditions of the unrighteous in the afterlife.

The Sermon On The Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount, we have a number of references to hell as the final destination of the wicked. To begin with, we find Him saying that the anger can cause someone to be sent to hell:

You have heard that it was said to an older generation, ‘Do not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.’ But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says ‘Fool’ will be sent to fiery hell (Matthew 5:21-22 NET).

In this first description, we see Jesus speaking of a “fiery hell” that awaits the wicked.

The Entire Body Will Be Cast Into Hell

We then read of Jesus warning about the “whole body” of a person being thrown into hell:

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell (Matthew 5:29,30 NIV).

Jesus used the term translated as “hell” twice in these verses. According to the Lord, the conditions in hell are so horrible that it would be better to suffer the loss of eye, or a hand, in this life, than the for whole body to end up in hell. This assumes that a horrific destiny awaits the wicked.

There Is A Wide Gate That Leads To Destruction

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord said:

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. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13-14 ESV).

The narrow gate leads to life, while the wide gate leads to destruction, the eventual punishment of hell.

The Unrighteous Will Be Thrown Into The Fire

As we have already seen, Jesus compared the punishment in hell with fire. In this context, we find Christ comparing the false teachers to trees being thrown into the fire:

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matthew 7:19 ESV).

As noted, the warning that unbelievers will be cast into a fiery punishment is an illustration the Lord often gives.

Not Everyone Will Enter Heaven

Elsewhere He said that not everyone who used His name would enter the kingdom of God. Instead, some would be banished from His presence:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’ (Matthew 7:21-23 ESV).

Even those who spoke in the name of the Lord, or cast out demons in His name, were not guaranteed heaven. In other words, people will falsely pretend to follow Jesus to the point of speaking and acting in His authority.

These particular people, who do not believe in Jesus Christ, will be separated from the Lord on judgment day, they will not enter His kingdom. There is something else we must note from this passage. Jesus said that “not everyone” will enter the kingdom of heaven. Not only does this rule out the idea of universalism, that someday everyone will be allowed entrance to heaven, it also shows that there is another destiny for those who are not His followers.

Christ made it clear that these false prophets faced future punishment. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of hell, or final punishment, some six times. He obviously believed that punishment after death would occur to those who rejected Him.

Jews As Well As Gentiles Will Be Punished In The Afterlife

After Jesus completed the Sermon on the Mount, we find Him teaching that the chosen people, the Jews, would also be subject to future punishment if they did not believe in Him. In fact, Christ said that many children of the kingdom, the Jews, would be sent to outer darkness. Matthew records Him saying the following:

Hearing this, Jesus was amazed and said to those following Him, “I assure you: I have not found anyone in Israel with so great a faith. I tell you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:10-12 CSB).

In this passage, there is the contrast between the faith of a Gentile centurion who believed in Jesus, and those from the chosen people, the “sons of the kingdom,” the Jews, who rejected Him. While Jesus came first as the Savior of the Jews, those who did not believe in Him would be cast into “outer darkness” where there would be crying and the grinding of teeth. They would not participate in the Messianic banquet with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

There is something else we should note. Seven times in the gospels, Jesus called hell a place of “weeping and grinding of teeth.” This seems to plainly speak of a place of pain and suffering.

The Coming Of Jesus Into The World Divides People

In another place in Matthew, Jesus emphasized that the result of His coming to earth would actually divide people, not unite them. Why? It is because His message, as the Living God, would separate the believers from unbelievers. Those who believed would be rewarded, but those who did not believe in Him were to be punished. The Lord put it this way:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Matthew 10:34-37 ESV).

Far from being an obscure doctrine of Christ, final punishment of the wicked was central to His message. If a person believes in Him, then they will inherit the kingdom of God, but if someone rejects Him, nothing but judgment and then punishment awaits that individual. Jesus came to divide, not unite. Jesus came to bring a sword, not peace. The truth of Jesus Christ always divides people from one another. This is true for both time and eternity.

Unbelievers Would Be Punished To Different Degrees

Believers in heaven will receive different rewards based upon their faithfulness. Not everyone will be rewarded the same. In like manner, unbelievers will be punished in hell to different degrees based upon their knowledge of the truth.

First, we see Jesus teaching this truth as He sent out His disciples to the different cities of Israel:

And if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your message, shake the dust off of your feet as you leave that house or that town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for the region of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town (Matthew 10:14,15 NET).

Note that the Lord said the punishment for Sodom and Gomorrah would be more bearable than for that city that rejected the message of His disciples.

Jesus then contrasted the punishment of certain cities of His day with that of the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon, as well as the evil city of Sodom:

Then He proceeded to denounce the towns where most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago! But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until today. But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you” (Matthew 11:20-24 CSB).

Notice that it would be easier for these evil cities, including Sodom, than it would for the cities which personally saw His miracles. With knowledge comes responsibility.

This concept of proportional punishment was not only taught by Jesus, we will also find it taught in other places in the New Testament.

The Unbelievers Will Exist In The Age To Come

Jesus also warned about a sin which would not be forgiven in the coming age, a time when the unbelievers will continue to exist:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (Matthew 12:31,32 ESV).

The fact that there is no forgiveness in the coming age, among other things, tells us there is an “age to come” for unbelievers. Furthermore, in this age they will never be able to receive forgiveness for their sins! This is a very stern warning that the Lord gives.

The Parable Of The Wheat And The Weeds

Jesus gave a number of parables, earthly stories with heavenly meanings, to His disciples. This includes one about the wheat and the weeds. He then explained the parable as follows:

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world and the good seed are the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. As the weeds are collected and burned with fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom everything that causes sin as well as all lawbreakers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. The one who has ears had better listen! (Matthew 13:36-43 NET).

According to Jesus’ explanation, there will be a harvest at the end of the age where the angels will gather the unrighteous. These unbelievers will then be thrown into a furnace of fire where there will be crying and the grinding of teeth.

The Fire Of Hell Is Eternal

So far, we have seen that there will be punishment for the wicked in the afterlife, in the age to come. Yet the duration of their punishment has not been stated.

In this passage, we find that Christ taught that the fire in this place of punishment was eternal. Matthew records Him saying:

It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell (Matthew 18:8,9 NIV).

The fire of hell will never be extinguished. Indeed, it is called “eternal fire.” The punishment is so horrific that it would be better to have some body parts, such as eyes and limbs missing in this life, rather than have a complete body but go to hell in the next life. The fact that the fire is said to be eternal seems to rule out the idea that the wicked would merely be burned up, or made extinct by the fire.

Jesus Denounces The Religious Rulers And Jerusalem

One of the fascinating things that we discover is that Jesus warnings of hell were usually directed at the most respected people of His day, the religious rulers. We read Him saying:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to make one proselyte, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as fit for hell as you are! (Matthew 23:15 CSB).

Interestingly, the people who were obvious sinners, such as the cheating tax collectors, were offered the message of forgiveness while the religious rulers were warned of hell!

We also read the Lord saying to these religious rulers:

You snakes, you offspring of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell (Matthew 23:32,33 NET).

Strong words indeed from the Lord to these leaders.

Jesus also condemned those in the city of Jerusalem for their rejection of Him as the promised Messiah. He had the following words to say about the unbelief of the people of that city:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem! The city who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, yet you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will never see Me again until you say, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! (Matthew 23:37-39 CSB).

Therefore, it would not merely be pagans, the Gentiles, who would be judged and then punished. In fact, unbelieving Jews would also make up the population of hell.

The Olivet Discourse

In the Olivet Discourse, the last major teachings of Jesus, we find the following statements and teachings about the fate of the wicked.

The Parable Of The Ten Maidens

In the parable of the ten maidens, or bridesmaids, Jesus illustrated His coming by means of a wedding party. The following dialogue occurred between the groom and the unprepared maidens who were refused entrance to the wedding:

Later the other girls returned and shouted, “Sir, sir! Open the door for us!” But the groom replied, “I don’t even know you!” So, my disciples, always be ready! You don’t know the day or the time when all this will happen (Matthew 25:11-13 CEV).

Those unprepared would not be part of God’s wedding party, they would not be part of the celebration. In other words, they would experience the same destiny as the righteous.

The Unrighteous Will Be In Outer Darkness, Where There Is Crying And Grinding Of Teeth

As Jesus had earlier taught in Matthew, He again said that hell is a place of outer darkness, of crying, and of grinding of teeth. We read Him saying:

And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30 NIV).

The wicked are cast away from the loving presence of the Lord. Instead of enjoying His fellowship, they go to a place of outer darkness. In hell, there will be weeping and gnashing, or grinding, of teeth. This also speaks of conscious suffering.

The Punishment In Hell Is Everlasting

Jesus ended the Olivet discourse with the hope of heaven:

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world . . . (Matthew 25:34 ESV)

However, Christ also ended this discourse with a warning about the final destination for the wicked. We read the following words of Jesus:

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 . . . And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:41,46 ESV).

In these three verses, Jesus contrasted the future of the wicked with that of the righteous. The righteous go into eternal life, a kingdom that has been prepared for them since the very foundation of the world.

However, the unbelievers, whom the Lord called “cursed,” or “accursed,” will not enter God’s kingdom. Instead they will be sent to an “eternal fire,” a fire which was not originally made for humans but rather for the devil and his angels. In addition, the fire in which they are sent consists of eternal punishment.

The contrast is clear: eternal life for the believers, eternal punishment in the eternal fire for the unbelievers. Moreover, if one is an actual place, then both of them are. It is inconsistent to affirm that heaven exists while denying the reality of hell.

In addition, in this passage word “eternal” is describing the duration of the punishment, it is everlasting. While there are those who deny this is what the Lord meant by the word eternal in this context, this is the natural way in which to understand His meaning. We will have much more to say about this passage later.

Summation On Matthew

In sum, we find in the Gospel of Matthew that a future place of punishment for unbelievers was taught by Jesus, in His direct teachings as well as in His parables. Hell, an eternal fire, was the consequence of rejecting Him and His message.

The fact that the Lord taught the subject on so many occasions, and through direct teachings and parables, makes His belief in hell beyond all doubt. According to Jesus, the punishment is everlasting and those who are being punished are conscious.

Mark

The Gospel of Mark also contains the teachings of Jesus with respect to the destiny of the wicked. As we examine it, we will find it consistent with what Matthew recorded, as well as expanding upon it.

The Punishment Would Be Without End: There Is No Hope For The Lost

From Mark, we find that those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit would have no possibility of forgiveness. Jesus said:

But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin (Mark 3:29 NIV).

These are very strong words from Jesus. They will “never” be forgiven. In fact, it is called an “eternal” sin.

The Fire Of Hell Is Never Extinguished, The Maggots Never Die

Jesus said those who were extremely wicked would receive more severe punishment from the living God. The Lord spoke of their punishment in the afterlife with the words of the prophet Isaiah, unending fire and undying worms:

These little ones believe in me. It would be best for the person who causes one of them to lose faith to be thrown into the sea with a large stone hung around his neck. So if your hand causes you to lose your faith, cut it off! It is better for you to enter life disabled than to have two hands and go to hell, to the fire that cannot be put out. If your foot causes you to lose your faith, cut it off! It is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. If your eye causes you to lose your faith, tear it out! It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell. In hell worms that eat the body never die, and the fire is never put out (Mark 9:42-47 God’s Word).

We learn a number of things from this passage. They include the following.

Jesus again illustrates the idea of various degrees of punishment for the wicked. In this case, those who cause one who believes in Jesus to lose their faith will receive very strict punishment. Again, those who are more evil will receive greater punishment. This is consistent with what we read in Matthew.

Also we again find the Lord saying it is better to be disabled in this life than to have a complete body and be thrown into hell.

In addition, Jesus also builds upon the statements in the last verse of Isaiah concerning the undying maggots and the eternal fire. This further confirms that Isaiah was illustrating, in an earthly example, what would happen to the unrighteous in the next life. The fires of hell will never be extinguished and the maggots would never stop eating their bodies. We will have more to say about this verse later when we examine what Scripture says about the duration of the punishment in hell.

There Is Another Emphasis On More Severe Punishment

We then find another example of Jesus saying that some people would receive “more severe punishment.”

They devour widows’ property, and as a show make long prayers. These men will receive a more severe punishment (Mark 12:40 God’s Word).

While this is a statement that is unique to Mark, it is consistent with other statements of Jesus we have already examined. Indeed, the punishment for the wicked would be proportionate. Those who had the greater sin would receive harsher punishment than those who sinned less. However, all of those in hell will receive some type of punishment.

Summation On Mark

In sum, the teachings about hell in Mark are consistent with what we find in Matthew. Indeed, it adds to our knowledge about the destiny of the unrighteous in the afterlife. They will suffer punishment away from the presence of the Lord. Their suffering will be proportionate to their wickedness. Finally, their suffering will be eternal, the fires will never go out.

Luke

In Luke, we also find Jesus teaching about the judgment of hell, the final place of punishment. Among other things, the Lord did it by means of parables.

There Will Be Degrees Of Punishment For The Wicked

Jesus told the story of a slave who had thought that his master had delayed his coming. The slave acted as follows:

On the other hand, that servant may think that his master is taking a long time to come home. The servant may begin to beat the other servants and to eat, drink, and get drunk. His master will return at an unexpected time. Then his master will punish him severely and assign him a place with unfaithful people. The servant who knew what his master wanted but didn't get ready to do it will receive a hard beating. But the servant who didn't know *{what his master wanted}* and did things for which he deserved punishment will receive a light beating. A lot will be expected from everyone who has been given a lot. More will be demanded from everyone who has been entrusted with a lot (Luke 12:45-48 God's Word).

In this parable, Jesus again speaks of degrees of punishment. The one who has been entrusted much will have much expected from him. Therefore, he would be punished with a harsher sentence than those who knew less.

In fact, Jesus specifically stated that those who knew less would receive a lighter punishment than those who had greater knowledge. However, everyone, who does not end up in God's kingdom, will be punished to some degree.

Many Will Go To This Place Of Punishment, There They Will Suffer

On one occasion, the Lord was asked about the number of people who would eventually be saved. We read the following response:

Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' 'Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last (Luke 13:22-30 NIV).

In this passage we learn a number of things about the world to come.

First, there will be few who enter heaven, the great majority of the people will be lost.

Once the door to heaven is closed nobody will be able to enter in. This is consistent with what we learn in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, which we will consider next.

Though certain people will claim to have known Him, Jesus will say that He has never known them. Therefore, the mere claim to have a relationship with Him is not enough.

These unrighteous people will mourn and grind their teeth when they see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob feasting with the true believers in the kingdom of God, including many Gentiles, non-Jews.

The Story Of The Rich Man And Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

While this story of Jesus is not specifically about the final destination of the wicked, it does tell us what will happen to the wicked immediately upon death in their “intermediate” or “in-between” state. In fact, from this story we discover many things about the situation with the unrighteous in the realm of the dead.

Indeed, we find that the dead still exist, they are conscious, they are undergoing a fiery punishment, and they do not want any of their loved ones to end up in this place of torment. Furthermore, once they are in this place of punishment, there is no escaping to the place of the righteous dead.

Consequently, this story gives us information as to the ultimate destiny of the wicked by telling us about their immediate situation once they die. We will have more to say about this later.

Summation On Luke

Again we find further information from the teaching of Jesus about the destiny of the wicked. There is punishment for all unbelievers, but the punishment is proportional. Those who know and understand more, but who reject the Lord, will receive a harsher punishment than those who understand less.

He also taught that not everyone who claimed to know Him will enter heaven. In addition, once the door to heaven is shut, it cannot be opened.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus we discover that unbelievers do not lose consciousness after death but are sent to a place of conscious punishment while awaiting their final destination.

John

As is true with the first three gospels, the Gospel of John affirms Jesus teaching of the destiny of the wicked in the afterlife. In fact, we further discover that the teaching of Jesus about hell, a final punishment for the wicked, was not something isolated from His main message. To the contrary, it was central to His teachings.

Unbelievers Are Presently In A State Of Condemnation

Scripture says that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are presently in a state of condemnation:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:18 NIV).

According to this passage, the unrighteous are already in a state of condemnation. In other words, they are born in a state of spiritual separation from God the Father. Unless this changes, they will eternally exist in this state of condemnation.

God's Wrath Will Remain On Unbelievers

We also read Jesus saying how the wrath of God will remain upon these unbelievers:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them (John 3:36 NIV).

God's wrath will remain, or continue, on those who do not trust Jesus. In other words, it will not end.

Many Will Die In A State Of Unbelief

Furthermore, the people who die in a state of unbelief, will die in their sins. Jesus said to the religious rulers.

I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins (John 8:24 ESV).

Jesus Christ has paid the penalty for our sins. If a person rejects Him and the offer of salvation that He has provided, then "they" will be punished for their own sins.

The Religious Leaders Were Spiritually Blind To The Truth About Jesus

In another place, Jesus said that the people who thought they could see, were actually spiritually blind. We read the words of Jesus to the crowd as The Lord spoke of these blind leaders:

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, "Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains" (John 9:39-41 ESV).

Here we have the religious leaders being called “blind.” The ones who thought they could spiritually see were actually the ones who could not.

The Lost Could Not Go Where Jesus Was Going

Many of the religious leaders rejected Jesus. Jesus told these people that they could not go where He was going:

So he said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come” (John 8:21 ESV)

They were not able to follow Him into the next world because of their unbelief. This passage, along with others, removes any hope that someday everyone will wind up in heaven, a doctrine called “universalism.” Indeed, Jesus specifically told them that they will “not” be able to go where He is going.

Peter Would Be Able To Follow His Lord In The Next Life

In contrast to these wicked religious leaders, Jesus said to Peter, who was a believer in Him, that he could follow Christ to the same place where He would go in the “afterlife:”

“Lord,” Simon Peter said to Him, “where are You going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you will follow later” (John 13:36 CSB).

This is another indication of the two destinations of humanity. The believers go to heaven, while unbelievers go to hell. Furthermore, these destinies are forever fixed once a person dies.

Summation On John

Like the previous three gospels, John adds to our knowledge about the afterlife. We find that the unrighteous are born in a state of condemnation; they are separated from God by their sins. Unless this changes during this life, they will spend eternity separated from the Lord. Indeed, John records Jesus saying to the religious leaders that where He is going, they cannot go. On the other hand, the Lord told Peter that he could follow Him in the next life.

To sum up, the four gospels give us a large amount of information about the destiny of the wicked. In fact, it is from the life and ministry of Jesus that we find the most extensive teaching on this subject.

In addition, we will find that writers of the New Testament, apart from the four gospels, will build upon what the Lord taught. When we put the totality of the biblical teaching together, we will have sufficient information on the subject to come up with a number of specific conclusions about the destiny of the wicked in the afterlife.

Summary To Question 4
What Do The Four Gospels Say About The
Destiny Of The Wicked?

The four gospels add to our biblical information about the future of the wicked once this life is over.

First, we saw that John the Baptist warned of a coming fiery judgment for unbelievers. He said this fire would never be put out. This was consistent with the Old Testament teaching, as well as what many people who lived between the testaments had concluded about the fate of the wicked.

By far, however, the most thorough teaching on the subject of the destiny of the unrighteous comes from the Lord Jesus Himself. From the four gospels, we find that Jesus taught that hell, the place of final punishment for the wicked, is a reality. Indeed, the teaching of Jesus Christ leaves no question as to the existence of such a place which exists apart from blessed presence of God.

When we examine what Jesus personally taught about hell, we can make a number of observations. They are as follows.

To begin with, we find that hell was a main theme in the ministry of Christ. People needed to repent and believe in Him. Otherwise, they would be condemned to this awful place called hell.

In fact, without an actual place of punishment for the wicked, the message of Jesus, salvation from sin, makes no sense whatsoever. This is the message Jesus constantly preached. Hell, therefore, was not an obscure doctrine for Jesus.

Jesus also linked hell with heaven. To Him, heaven is a real place where believers will go upon their death. For those who do not believe in Him, hell is the place where these unbelievers must go. Everyone has to go somewhere, since we have all been made for eternity. Jesus offered heaven but stated that hell is for those who reject His offer.

The gospels tell us that it would not only be Gentiles who will be sent to hell. In fact, there also will be those among the chosen people, the Jews, who will also end up separated from the Lord. Indeed, the Jews who refused to believe in Jesus would go to hell. Therefore, hell was the final destination of all who rejected Christ, both Jew and Gentile.

Furthermore, His warnings about hell were mainly directed at the “good” people of His time. It was the religious rulers who were mostly warned of the punishment to come. This makes it clear that anyone could end up in hell unless they believed in Jesus.

Jesus also said that hell was not originally prepared for any human being but rather for the devil and his evil angels. Humans only go to hell if they reject the forgiveness which the Lord offers them. They have not been created to go there!

Jesus also described some of the sufferings in hell. He called it a place of weeping and grinding of teeth, outer darkness, as well as where the fires of judgment continually burn.

He further taught that there would be degrees of punishment for those in hell. For example, the cities which saw His miracles, and yet still rejected Him, would be punished more harshly than the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Most importantly, Jesus gave no indication that there would be any possible way to escape hell once this life is over. Indeed, once a person was in this place of punishment, they are there forever. Destinies are fixed. Those in hell will remain there for all eternity.

Jesus told the unbelieving religious leaders that they could not follow Him where He was going. Yet, Peter, the believer, was told that he would be able to follow Jesus later. Therefore, where we ultimately go is our choice. It all depends upon what we do with Jesus.

This basically sums up the teaching of the Lord Jesus on the subject of hell, the final destination of the wicked. It is one of His most oft-mentioned teachings. Consequently, we need to take His words about hell seriously.

Furthermore, as we will observe, the remainder of the New Testament builds upon His teaching. As we continue to examine the subject, we will be able to come up with a number of conclusions about the doctrine of the destiny of the wicked from the totality of Scripture.

Question 5

What Observations Should We Make About Jesus' View Of The Destiny Of The Wicked?

Jesus Christ believed that hell, everlasting punishment, was a reality. This is clear from an examination of His teachings as found in the four gospels. Furthermore, rather than being an obscure doctrine, it was a main part of His message. Undeniably, people need to believe in Him to be saved from the punishment of hell.

If Jesus did indeed believe that the wicked would suffer eternally because of their sins, then what does this mean? What conclusions should we draw from Jesus' belief in a place of everlasting punishment, hell?

We can make the following observations.

1. Jesus Is In A Position To Know The Truth About Hell

To begin with, Jesus Christ is certainly in a position to know whether or not hell exists. He is the eternal God who became a human being. In fact, among the reasons He came to earth was to explain God's truth to humanity. John wrote:

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known (John 1:18 NIV).

If we want to know what God is like, then we look to Jesus for the answers. He came to this world to make God known. Therefore, we go to Him for answers to the questions about heaven and hell.

2. Jesus Believed In Hell: It Is Not An Ancient Superstition

If Jesus Christ believed that hell existed, and He did, then we cannot insist that hell is some primitive belief of an ancient ignorant people. We cannot set aside the belief in hell as a product of superstition, or lack of understanding of what truly exists in the unseen realm.

If God the Son believed in hell, then it is a reality. He is "the truth." As the truth, whatever He says, about any issue, is the final Word on the subject. Hell, a place of everlasting punishment for the wicked, does exist because Jesus said so.

3. Hell Is Not An Evil Doctrine

Furthermore, hell should not be seen as an evil doctrine. There are many people today who attempt to say this. They either deny hell exists or to reinterpret what it means. Whatever the case may be, they deny the historical doctrine of hell as an eternal place of punishment for the wicked. In doing so, they believe they are showing genuine compassion for the lost, more compassion than those who believe the historical doctrine.

However, this is not the proper way of looking at the issue of hell. Belief in hell is not something evil, neither is it showing lack of compassion for the lost. Indeed, Jesus, God the Son, who taught that hell is the final destination for unbelievers, is the same Person who died for these people! He died so that nobody has to go to hell.

Consequently, for people who attempt to say that “they” somehow have a greater compassion for the eternal destinies of unbelievers than Jesus, is not only ludicrous, it borders on blasphemy.

All attempts to belittle the doctrine of hell are belittling the Son of God. None of us should dare think that we have a greater concern or compassion for the human race than Jesus. We do not. He has proved His compassion for the lost. He died for them.

4. The Denial Of Hell Is A Denial Of God’s Word

Therefore, denying hell is a denial of God’s Word. This is nothing new. In fact, the first recorded words out of the mouth of the serpent in the Garden of Eden were a denial of God’s Word. We read what occurred in the first chapter of Genesis:

Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You can’t eat from any tree in the garden’” (Genesis 3:1 CSB).

Today, we find the same denial when it comes to the belief in hell. People ask the question, “Did God really say this?” The answer is, “Indeed, He certainly did!”

5. Jesus Gave No Hope To Those In Hell: We Should Not Give People False Hope

Because Jesus taught that punishment awaits those who reject Him, we should not give people false hope about such a place. We need to take seriously what He taught. Hell is a real place from where there is no escape.

Consequently, we should not hold out the possibility that this punishment will someday end for those who reject the Son of God. He did not offer such hope. We need to take His words about hell at their plain and obvious meaning. Let us not be guilty of twisting His words to fit what we think hell, the place of final punishment, should be like. We should not give people false hope.

6. If Jesus Believed In Hell, Then So Should We

This brings us to our logical conclusion. If Jesus Christ believed that such a place as hell, the place of everlasting punishment, truly exists, then we should also believe it. We should have the same stance on hell as Jesus. None of us should assume that we know better than Him on this subject. We do not.

Summary To Question 5
What Observations Should We Make About Jesus'
View Of The Destiny Of The Wicked?

Jesus Christ taught that the ultimate fate of the wicked was in a place called hell. It consists of eternal separation of that person from the God of the Bible. In hell, the individual is punished for rejecting Christ and His offer of forgiveness of sin.

In addition, Jesus never indicated that those in hell would someday be able to escape its punishment. Destinies are forever fixed. This being the case, we can make some observations and conclusions about Jesus' view of hell. They are as follows.

As God the Son who became a human being, Jesus would certainly be in a position to know whether or not such a place as hell existed. He taught that it is a reality. The fact that Jesus Christ believed in an eternal hell should silence those who contend that Scripture does not teach such a doctrine. Belief in hell is not mere superstition, or the result of an ignorant group of people inventing a place of punishment for the wicked. It is the belief of the eternal Son of God!

Consequently, hell is not a false belief, nor is it a false doctrine, since it comes from the God of the Bible, a God of truth and holiness.

Furthermore, the doctrine of an eternal hell is not an evil doctrine, neither is it a belief that is unconcerned about the fate of the lost. No Bible-believer should ever attempt to give the impression that they are more concerned for the fate of the wicked than Jesus was. He died so these people would not have to go to hell! Indeed, He suffered the punishment which these people deserved, the innocent for the guilty.

Therefore, any attempt to explain away the doctrine of hell is basically saying that either Jesus does not know best, or that He is not really concerned about the people who are lost. This position is ludicrous as well as being blasphemous.

Consequently, the denial of hell is a denial of God's Word. It is also a denial of the authority of Jesus Christ. Bible-believing Christians should therefore think long and hard about any statements they make about hell. We certainly do not want to be in conflict with the teachings of Jesus on the subject. Since Jesus has the final word on any matter for which He speaks, we should take seriously everything He says. Furthermore, since Christ teaches that hell exists, and describes the sufferings of those in hell, we should not try to explain away what He clearly says about the subject.

Instead we need to deal honestly and seriously with His statements on the matter of final punishment. We should not pretend that hell does not exist or give false hope to those who are going there. We need to have the mind of Jesus Christ on the subject of hell. The only way this can happen is by a serious study of what His Word says about it.

Question 6

What Did The Apostle Paul Have To Say About The Destiny Of The Wicked?

To this point, we have seen that the Old Testament, John the Baptist, and Jesus have all taught that the wicked would be punished in the afterlife. In fact, Jesus gave us the most comprehensive description of the destiny of the unrighteous.

What about the Apostle Paul? Did he have anything to say on the subject? Did he agree with Jesus on the fate of the wicked?

Paul's Preaching To The Lost Assumes A Future Punishment

Everywhere the Apostle Paul went, he preached the necessity of a person being “saved” from their sins by believing in Jesus. Being saved certainly has the idea of being saved from something. On a number of occasions, Paul wrote, as well as spoke, on the destiny of the wicked. They are presently “lost” in sin and need to be saved from their lost condition.

In fact, it is difficult to understand why Paul had such a passion for preaching the gospel if he did not assume a terrible fate awaited the unbelievers.

Paul's Heart Toward The Lost People Of Israel

To the Romans, Paul bore his heart about those Israelites who are apart from Jesus Christ:

I am telling the truth in Christ (I am not lying!), for my conscience assures me in the Holy Spirit-I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish a that I myself were accursed-cut off from Christ-for the sake of my people, my fellow countrymen, who are Israelites. To them belong the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from them, by human descent, came the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever! Amen (Romans 9:1-5 NET)

Notice that Paul wished that he could be “accursed,” instead of them. In fact, we find that Jesus used a similar term to describe the lost in Matthew 25:41, also translated “accursed.”

This is the description of those apart from Christ. They are doomed to spend eternity apart from the Lord unless they turn to Him for forgiveness.

Consequently, Paul, who was completely aware of the destiny facing the wicked, was motivated to unceasingly preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Wicked Will Be Punished

While Paul does not use the word “hell” or “Gehenna” in his writings, he did teach that the wicked will be punished in the afterlife. Indeed, as we examine his writings, we find such words as destruction, wrath, separation, and accursed describing the destiny of the wicked. We will provide a few examples.

In Romans, Paul in no uncertain terms, warns of the future wrath of God as well as punishment for those who have an unrepentant heart:

But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek (Romans 2:5-9 ESV).

Paul wrote that a time of wrath and fury from the Lord will be coming upon the unrighteous. Note that he said that “every human being” who is not a believer will experience this punishment. He explains it as “wrath” and “fury” which will cause “tribulation” and “distress” for the wicked. In addition, the wrath of God will be experienced by both Jew and Gentile. Nobody will escape.

The Wicked Will Be Judged, Punished Then Separated From The Lord

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians of the judgment and future punishment of the wicked. He gave the following warning:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 NIV).

These verses teach us a number of things about the destiny of the wicked.

First, the punishment they will receive at the coming of the Lord is retribution, or payback, for their life of sin. This is important for us to understand.

Consequently, the unrighteous will not be reformed in the afterlife for their evil deeds, rather they will be punished. God’s wrath in the afterlife is not for the purpose of correction, it is for punishment.

The punishment of the unbelievers will include being shut out from the holy presence of the Lord. In other words, unbelievers will be separated from all that is good, as well as being personally punished for their unbelief.

The wicked will be paid back with “everlasting destruction” when they are shut out from the presence of the Lord. This is consistent with what Jesus said about the everlasting punishment of the wicked:

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels’
(Matthew 25:41 NET)

The wicked are accursed, they are under the judgment of the Lord which will lead to their everlasting punishment.

As we will develop in later questions, the word translated “destruction” does not mean annihilation; that the person will become extinct. It has the idea of ruin and loss.

Indeed, the payback that the wicked will receive is an eternity of ruin or loss for their lack of belief in the God of the Bible. It is the loss of being in God’s presence, as well as punishment for rejecting Him. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture on the subject.

Summation On Paul

While Paul does not go into great detail on the subject of the fate of the wicked, his teaching is consistent with what we find in the four gospels. There will be a day of wrath coming where the Lord will judge the unbelievers and then punish them. This punishment includes everlasting separation from His presence. In addition, the unrighteous will be in a state of eternal ruin or destruction.

This explains why we find Paul having such a passion to preach the good news to the lost. In fact, he told the Romans that he wished that he himself could be “accursed” from Christ for their sake of his fellow countrymen.

Indeed, he was very aware what awaited them if they rejected the good news about Jesus, the Messiah. Like Paul, this should motivate us to preach the gospel to everyone, both Jew and Gentile.

Summary To Question 6

What Did The Apostle Paul Have To Say About The Destiny Of The Wicked?

In the New Testament era, not only do we find John the Baptist and Jesus speaking about the destiny of the wicked, there is also the teaching of the Apostle Paul on the subject.

While he never specifically used the word Gehenna, or the phrase, “the lake of fire” in his writings, he did mention the ultimate destination of the wicked a number of times using various terms. They include “accursed,” “separation” “wrath,” and “everlasting destruction.”

In examining what Paul wrote, we find that it is consistent with Jesus' view of an everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked. While certain words that he used to describe their fate, such as "perishing" and "destruction" could be seen to teach the eventual annihilation of the wicked, when we look at the totality of his writings, we find that they do no such thing.

Indeed, the writings of Paul are consistent with what we have already seen from the Old Testament as well as from the teaching of Jesus in the four gospels. The unrighteous are accursed. They will be judged, punished and then eternally separated from the Lord. This is consistent with the doctrine of the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked.

Question 7

What Do The Book Of Hebrews, Second Peter, And Jude Tell Us About The Eternal Destiny Of The Wicked?

Apart from the writings of Paul, we have three other New Testament letters which provides us with further insight on the topic of the final destiny of the wicked. They are Hebrews, Second Peter, and Jude.

As we will discover, these three writers add to our knowledge of the fate of the lost, as well as confirming the teachings of Jesus and Paul on the subject.

Hebrews

In the Book of Hebrews, there are a number of passages that speak of punishment coming to the wicked.

There Will Be A Payback For Sin

To begin with, we find that sin will be punished. In fact, we are specifically told that this punishment is “payback” for the sins that the unrighteous have committed:

For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation (Hebrews 2:2,3 ESV).

The translation “God’s Word puts it this way:

After all, the message that the angels brought was reliable, and every violation and act of disobedience was properly punished. So how will we escape punishment if we reject the important message, the message that God saved us (Hebrews 2:2,3 God’s Word).

Notice while there is a “just retribution” or “proper punishment” for the wicked, there is a message of great salvation, which is available for those who will receive it. Again there are two eternal destinies, salvation for believers, payback or punishment for unbelievers.

Eternal Judgment Was An Elementary Doctrine

Later we read that the idea of the eternal judgment of the wicked was one of the elementary doctrines of the Christian faith:

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so (Hebrews 6:1-3 NIV)

We find something very important in this statement with respect to the question we are examining. Note that the subject of eternal judgment is one of six of the “elementary teachings” about Jesus Christ!

In other words, this was a basic Christian doctrine which is linked here with the resurrection from the dead. Among other things, this tells us that the teachings of Jesus, with respect to eternal judgment for the wicked, was something that was repeatedly taught by the apostles to the point that it is one of the “basic teachings” of the Christian faith.

This should put to rest the claim that the doctrine of eternal judgment, namely hell, was something that was hardly ever taught by Jesus. As we observed when we looked at the teaching of the four gospels on the subject, the destiny of the wicked was an integral part of Jesus’ message.

In fact, this is confirmed in the Book of Acts. In fact, we read about this coming judgment when Paul spoke to a group of people in the city of Athens:

Therefore, although God has overlooked such times of ignorance, he now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he designated, having provided proof to everyone by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30,31 NET).

While Paul did not mention Jesus Christ by name in this speech in Athens, he did declare that the resurrection from the dead proved Jesus has the authority to judge the world. In fact, he proclaimed that this coming judgment of the world will be on a fixed day, meaning it is certain. Jesus will judge the entire world in righteousness, or with fairness. This is why people must repent of their sins, judgment is coming.

The fact that He will judge everyone is consistent with the idea of some will be saved while others will be lost. Otherwise, why judge and why tell the people to repent?

Accordingly, eternal judgment is an elementary doctrine of the Christian faith. Indeed, Paul addressed this topic when he had the one chance to speak to this group of unbelievers in the city of Athens.

To sum up, while this verse in Hebrews does not get into specifics about the fate of the wicked, it does say that the judgment is “eternal.”

After Death Comes Judgment

We are also told later in Hebrews that after death there is judgment:

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27 NIV).

Death, then judgment which then leads to punishment for the unbeliever.

A Fiery Punishment Awaits The Wicked

We then read about a horrific punishment that awaits those who have rejected Jesus as the Messiah:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God . . . But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved (Hebrews 10:26-31,39 NIV).

For those who reject Christ there is a coming punishment which is worse than physical death. It is “payback” for those who have not believed in Him. Again, the punishment of unbelievers consists of retribution, it does not have the idea that it will redeem or eventually save them.

We also should notice that the writer, in verse 39, puts his readers in a different category than those to whom he was referring, the wicked. Clearly the Lord will punish the wicked.

Summation On Hebrews

The Book of Hebrews is often ignored in the discussion of the fate of the wicked but it certainly should not be! Indeed, it not only confirms that the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the unrighteous is a basic Christian belief, it also re-enforces the idea that the punishment for the lost is payback for their sins.

Indeed, there is no teaching whatsoever in Scripture that the lost will be reformed or redeemed after suffering a certain amount of punishment in the unseen realm.

Second Peter

The New Testament book of Second Peter also adds to our knowledge of the subject of hell.

The Examples Of Past Punishment Of Sin

Peter lists a number of past examples concerning how God has punished sin:

For if God didn’t spare the angels who sinned but threw them down into Tartarus and delivered them to be kept in chains of darkness until

judgment; and if He didn't spare the ancient world, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others, when He brought a flood on the world of the ungodly; and if He reduced the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes and condemned them to ruin, making them an example to those who were going to be ungodly (2 Peter 2:4-6 CSB).

The Lord has judged sin in the past, and He will do in the future. In fact, we have the examples of the sinning angels, those who perished in the flood, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Clearly, sin will be punished.

The Unrighteous Are Waiting For The Day Of Judgment

We then find that the unbelievers are presently being held for a future judgment and then punishment:

If so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from their trials, and to reserve the unrighteous for punishment at the day of judgment, especially those who indulge their fleshly desires and who despise authority (2 Peter 2:9,10 NET)

Notice that the unrighteous are kept for punishment that will commence on the “day of judgment.” This is an important text in understanding the future of the wicked. The day of judgment brings punishment to the lost.

There Are Degrees Of Punishment

As we have seen elsewhere in Scripture, with the teachings of Jesus, we find that the unrighteous will suffer to varying degrees in the afterlife:

If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,” and, “A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud” (2 Peter 2:20-22 NIV).

Here again we find the biblical principle that there will be degrees of punishment for the wicked. While all unbelievers will be separated from God in the afterlife, those with greater knowledge will suffer greater punishment. In fact, it would have been better had they never known the truth than to know it and then reject it.

Summary On Peter

From Second Peter we increase our knowledge of the future of the unrighteous. After giving past examples of the Lord punishing sin, we find that the unrighteous are waiting for the day of judgment. When that occurs, their punishment will be proportional to their sin.

Jude

Next, we come to the Book of Jude. In it, we read about the fate of certain false teachers.

The Sinning Angels And Sodom Serve As Examples Of Future Punishment

Like Peter, Jude gives examples of the Lord judging sin in the past:

You also know that the angels who did not keep within their proper domain but abandoned their own place of residence, he has kept in eternal chains in utter darkness, locked up for the judgment of the great Day. So also Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighboring towns, since they indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire in a way similar to these angels, are now displayed as an example by suffering the punishment of eternal fire (Jude 6,7 NET).

Notice that these are examples of what is to come for the unbelievers in the afterlife. The punishment will be “eternal fire.”

Jude then speaks about the fate of the false prophets:

These men are dangerous reefs at your love feasts, feasting without reverence, feeding only themselves. They are waterless clouds, carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit twice dead, uprooted; wild sea waves, spewing out the foam of their shame; wayward stars for whom the utter depths of eternal darkness have been reserved (Jude 12,13 NET)

Jude says the utter depths of eternal darkness are reserved for them. Coupled with verse seven, we have eternal fire and eternal darkness awaiting them.

We also read further of the destiny of these people:

Now Enoch, the seventh in descent beginning with Adam, even prophesied of them, saying, “Look! The Lord is coming with thousands and thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all, and to convict every person of all their thoroughly ungodly deeds that they have committed, and of all the harsh words that ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (Jude 14-15 NET).

The Lord, at His coming, will execute judgment upon the ungodly. Finally, we read this:

Maintain yourselves in the love of God, while anticipating the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that brings eternal life. And have mercy on those who waver; save others by snatching them out of the fire (Jude 21-23 NET)

This is further information on the destiny of the unrighteous. Eternal life for the believer but a fiery punishment awaits the lost.

Summary On Jude

From Jude, we find that the unrighteous will experience eternal fire, as well as eternal darkness, in the afterlife. As we have seen in the teachings of Jesus, Paul, the writer to the Hebrews and Peter, we also see taught here in Jude; this punishment will take place when the Lord returns. In other words, it is still in the future.

In sum, from these three New Testament writings we have further evidence that the punishment in hell is both conscious and eternal. This agrees with what Jesus taught as well as what we have discovered from the writings of Paul. It is also emphasized by each of these writers that this punishment will occur when the Lord returns and then judges the unbelievers.

Summary To Question 7

What Do The Book Of Hebrews, Second Peter, And Jude Tell Us About The Eternal Destiny Of The Wicked?

Three of the New Testament letters, Hebrews, Second Peter, and Jude, add to our knowledge of the destiny of the wicked in the next world.

To begin with, the Book of Hebrews tells us that “eternal judgment” is one of the elementary teachings of Christ. This is crucial for us to understand because it refutes any idea that Jesus did not really address the subject, or that His words were not to be interpreted at face value. To the contrary, it is a basic Christian doctrine. Furthermore, the eternal judgment is linked with the resurrection from the dead. The believing dead are raised and then rewarded by the Lord. Their eternal destiny is heaven. On the other hand, the unbelieving dead are raised, judged, and then punished. Their eternal destiny then follows, hell.

While no specifics about the punishment in eternity is given, it is consistent to assume that the teaching is no different than what Jesus taught, that the wicked will experience everlasting conscious punishment.

In Second Peter, we are told that the unrighteous are “kept” or “reserved” for everlasting punishment as will be determined on the “Day of Judgment.” There is consistent with the doctrine of the conscious punishment of the wicked after they are judged by the Lord. We also have further insights on the fate of the wicked from the small Book of Jude. He writes that the wicked will experience the “eternal darkness forever.” Jude also emphasizes that the coming judgment will take place when the Lord returns. Therefore, the beliefs about hell from these three New Testament books are consistent with what we have previously found in the Old Testament as well as in the four gospels, and the writings of Paul. Hell, the ultimate destiny of the wicked, does indeed exist and those in hell will be consciously punished forever for their sin.

Question 8

What Does The Book Of Revelation Have To Say About The Fate Of The Wicked?

We now come to the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation. As we will discover, it has much to say about the subject of the final destiny of the wicked.

An Angel Speaks Of The Coming Punishment Of The Wicked

We find an angel speaking of the coming punishment for those who take the “mark of the beast.” The Bible puts it this way:

Then a third angel followed them, shouting, “Anyone who worships the beast and his statue or who accepts his mark on the forehead or the hand must drink the wine of God’s wrath. It is poured out undiluted into God’s cup of wrath. And they will be tormented with fire and burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. The smoke of their torment rises forever and ever, and they will have no relief day or night, for they have worshiped the beast and his statue and have accepted the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:9-11 NLT).

Those who accept the mark of the beast will experience the wrath of God. Indeed, they will be punished forever in the presence of the Lord. This is clear. Furthermore, there is no relief from that punishment, it is day and night, and it is everlasting.

While this passage is speaking specifically of those who take the mark, it is consistent with the rest of Scripture which teaches the everlasting punishment of all those who reject the Lord.

The Beast, And The False Prophet Are Thrown Into The Lake Of Fire

When Jesus Christ returns to the earth, He will capture the beast and the false prophet and cast them both alive into the lake of fire:

But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 19:20 NIV).

Notice they are thrown alive into the lake of fire. There is nothing said about their extinction or annihilation when they receive this punishment.

The Destiny Of The Devil

One thousand years later, we find that the created spirit-being who became the devil, will also be thrown into the same lake of fire as the beast and false prophet had been previously thrown.

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth . . . And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever (Revelation 20:7,10 NIV).

Notice that the beast and false prophet are still in the lake of fire one thousand years after they had previously been cast into this fiery punishment. In other words, they have been tormented all of this time, burned, but not consumed.

The Great White Throne Judgment

Finally, we come to the Last Judgment, also known as the Great White Throne. This is indeed an awesome scene!

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15 NIV).

In this final judgment, those whose names are not found written in the Book of Life are thrown into the lake of fire, the same lake of fire where the devil, the beast, and the false prophet have already been cast into. Their destiny is the same as these three personages, forever separated from the Lord in a place of conscious punishment.

The Unrighteous Remain Outside Of The Holy City

After the “last judgment” the Lord then creates a “new heaven” and a “new earth.” The Holy City, the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven to the new earth. In the explanation of the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, we find that the unbelievers exist “outside” of the presence of the Lord. We also discover that they will remain there forever. Three passages make this clear:

The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But to the cowards, unbelievers, detestable persons, murderers, the sexually immoral, and those who practice magic spells, idol worshipers, and all those who lie, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur. That is the second death (Revelation 21:7,8 NET).

First, it is re-emphasized that the lost are in the lake of fire.

Then we are told that only the righteous will be able to enter the Holy City:

They will bring the grandeur and the wealth of the nations into it, but a nothing ritually unclean will ever enter into it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or practices falsehood, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:26 NET).

While individuals from the various nations will enter the New Jerusalem, the entrance is limited. Indeed, only those whose names are written in the Book of Life may enter the Holy City. The unbelievers will "never" be able to enter into it.

Later, the same thing is repeated:

Blessed are those who wash their robes so they can have access to the tree of life and can enter into the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood! (Revelation 22:14 NET).

For a third time we are told that only the righteous have access to the Holy City. Outside of the New Jerusalem are the unbelievers. They will remain outside forever.

Therefore, in these three verses, we are told that the fate of the wicked will be in the lake of fire, the second death. They will never be able to enter the Holy City, they will always remain outside.

Summary On The Book Of Revelation

From the last book of the Bible, we find further information about the fate of the lost. Indeed, in this particular book there are a number of passages which clearly state the destiny of the wicked, as well as the devil who has deceived them.

In a later question, we will examine three of these passages in Revelation in-depth, as we answer those who would argue that the fate of the wicked is merely annihilation, or extinction, rather than unending conscious punishment.

Conclusion: The Wicked Will Be Punished

In sum, from the totality of biblical teaching, there is no doubt whatsoever that the wicked will be judged, and then after their judgment comes the punishment, the payback, for not accepting the truth of God as revealed in the Bible.

Their punishment will be eternal and conscious. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture on the subject.

Summary To Question 8
What Does The Book Of Revelation Have
To Say About The Fate Of The Wicked?

As is true with the previous books of the Bible, the very last book, Revelation, also teaches that there is a place of everlasting punishment for the wicked. It is known as hell, the “lake of fire.”

From the Book of Revelation, we find that hell will be the destiny for those who have taken the “mark of the beast,” the final Antichrist. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

In addition, at the Second Coming of Christ, we discover that the beast and the false prophet, will be the first to be cast into hell, the lake of fire.

The devil will be thrown into the same lake of fire some one thousand years later. At that time, we find that the beast and the false prophet are still alive in the fiery lake. In other words, their one thousand years in the lake of fire did not annihilate them, it did not make them extinct.

Finally, all those who have rejected God’s truth from the beginning of time will also be sent to hell, the lake of fire, after they are judged at the final Judgment, the “Great White Throne.”

In the description of the New Jerusalem, in Revelation 21 and 22, we discover that the unrighteous exist outside of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. These chapters emphasize that they will “never” be able to enter it. Never! Their destiny is set for all eternity.

In sum, the Book of Revelation confirms what the totality of Scripture has previously recorded about the destiny of the wicked in the afterlife. Indeed, they will be banished from the presence of the Lord forever where they will endure everlasting conscious punishment for their unbelief.

In a later question, we will take an in-depth look at three passages in the Book of Revelation, as we respond to those who believe that the wicked will not suffer everlasting conscious punishment, but rather will be annihilated, made to be extinct, after the Last Judgment.

Question 9

After Looking At The Totality Of Scripture, What Do We Discover About The Final Place Of Punishment For The Wicked? (Hell, The Lake Of Fire)

Having examined the Old Testament, the period between the testaments, as well as the New Testament teaching on the fate of the wicked in the afterlife, we can make a number of observations and conclusions.

Death Does Not Equal Non-Existence

To begin with, according to Scripture, death is not the end of existence for the believer or the unbeliever. We can make the following observations.

The Rich Man And Lazarus

In Luke 16:19-31, we have Jesus' teaching that there is an "in-between" state between the time of death and then the eventual resurrection of the dead. In particular, we are told of a rich man who was suffering in this intermediate state. Whether or not it is a parable, it does inform us that death is not the end of existence for either the righteous or the unrighteous.

Furthermore, the fact that Jesus gave us so many details of the state of the wicked in the afterlife should cause us to pay close attention to what this man was experiencing. The Lord certainly did not give us so many specifics so as to mislead us as to what happens to someone immediately after they die! Indeed, this we know for certain!

Moses And Elijah

In Matthew 17:1-3, Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. This is further testimony that the dead do not go out of existence. In fact, we have two people present with the Lord, one who died, Moses, and one who was taken up to heaven, Elijah. Both are very much alive in the afterlife.

Believers Are Immediately In God's Presence Upon Death

Later we are told that when the believer dies, they will be absent from their body but they will be present, or at home, with the Lord:

Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8 ESV).

The Contemporary English Version puts it this way.

We should be cheerful, because we would rather leave these bodies and be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8 CEV)

Therefore, one second after believers dies, we are immediately in the presence of the Lord!

We Have Passed From Death Into Life

Indeed, John wrote about believers passing out of death into life:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death (1 John 3:14 ESV)

This is in line with what Jesus taught. He said that though a person dies, they shall still live:

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this” (John 11:25 NIV).

Therefore, death brings everyone to another destination. It is certainly not the end of our existence.

Consequently, life comes after death. For the believer, this includes spiritual life, which takes place the moment one puts their faith in Jesus Christ. In addition, there is life in the next world, after experiencing physical death.

Yet for the unbeliever, there is no spiritual life in this world, and no life with God in the next world.

In sum, the teaching of Scripture is clear: death is the separation of the body and the spirit. The body dies and ceases to function, but the spirit or the soul lives on forever. Indeed, humans do not become non-existent once this life is over.

The Wicked Must Go Somewhere

If the soul, or spirit, of humans lives on, it must live somewhere. If the unrighteous are going to suffer punishment for their sins, then this punishment must happen somewhere. Though the place of this final punishment is not located for us, it is named. The Bible calls it hell, the lake of fire.

While hell, the place of final punishment, is never fully explained in the Bible, as we have seen, we are told many things about this terrible place. From the totality of Scripture a number of observations can be made. They include the following.

Observation 1: Hell Is The Second Death

The Scripture teaches there is such a thing as a “second death.” The “first death” is physical death, while the second death is eternal death. Indeed, since the main idea behind death is separation, this is eternal separation from God. In common speech, this place is known as hell. The Bible says.

But to the cowards, unbelievers, detestable persons, murderers, the sexually immoral, and those who practice magic spells, idol worshipers,

and all those who lie, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur. That is the second death (Revelation 21:8 NET).

Once a person enters the realm of the wicked dead there is no escape. Those who experience physical death without Jesus Christ will also experience the second death. There is no hope for them, and there is no second chance.

**Observation 2: There Are Different Words Used
To Describe The Place**

One of the important issues, in considering what the Bible says about “hell,” is the understanding of the different Hebrew and Greek words used to describe where people, as well as angels, will be punished.

Many older English versions render the words Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and Tartarus, by the one English word, hell. This is unfortunate because each term has different shades of meanings, and speaks of different phases of God’s judgment.

Observation 3: There Are Different Phases Of Judgment

Sheol and Hades are terms used of the intermediate, or in-between state of the human dead, while Tartarus is used of the intermediate state of fallen angels. None of these three terms refer to the final state of the wicked. In fact, Sheol, for the most part, refers to the physical place where the dead are buried, the grave.

Only the term Gehenna speaks of the place of everlasting punishment for both wicked humans and sinning angels. Gehenna, therefore, the lake of fire, would be equivalent to what we popularly understand as hell.

**Observation 4: There Is A Final Judgment And Then Comes
Punishment For The Wicked**

Therefore, when most people think of hell, it means the “permanent place” of final punishment. In this book, when we refer to hell, it will be the lake of fire, the place of final punishment.

**Observation 5: Hell, The Lake Of Fire, Is Spoken
Of Frequently In The Bible**

As we have observed in going through the New Testament, the subject of hell is mentioned frequently. In fact, the Bible speaks of God’s wrath more than His love or mercy. It is not because His wrath is greater than His mercy, rather it is to warn the people of the upcoming judgment. Jesus said:

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death (Revelation 2:11 NIV).

The second death, hell, is a reality.

The Scripture also says:

Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. For them the second death holds no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him a thousand years. And death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death--the lake of fire (Revelation 20:6,14 NLT).

The subject of hell is often spoken of in the Scripture. Why? It is so that people could take the proper measures to avoid it.

Observation 6: Hell Is An Actual Place

As heaven is an actual place, so is hell. The Bible links the two places together. It is not the playground of the devil, nor does it refer to any punishment here on earth. It is a real place where real people will spend a conscious eternity apart from God. In fact, apart from heaven, it is the *only* other place where people will spend eternity.

Observation 7: The Lake Of Fire Was Created For Sinning Angels

When God created the heavens and the earth, everything was very good. We read the following in the Book of Genesis:

And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, *it was* very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day (Genesis 1:31 KJV).

Sometime in the past, there was an angelic rebellion. When this occurred, sin entered the previously sinless universe. Hell was then created. Therefore, it was not part of God's original creation or design, but was made specifically for the devil and his angels. Jesus made this clear as He said the following:

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' (Matthew 25:41 ESV).

God did not create a place of punishment for humanity. Humans were made to spend eternity with Him. They were not created to go to hell!

Observation 8: Sinful Humans Will Also Go To Hell

Although hell was not created for humanity, those humans who reject God's gift of salvation will be sent to this place of punishment. Since everyone has been made to exist eternally, those who reject Jesus Christ and His gift of salvation must be sent somewhere.

The spiritual condition in which a person dies will continue for all eternity.

Jesus gave the following warning to the religious leaders of His day:

I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins (John 8:24 ESV).

Hell will be where sinful humans will eventually go. In this context, sinful human beings are those who reject Jesus Christ as Savior, the One who has paid the penalty for their sins.

Observation 9: There Will Be No Complaints Of Unfairness In Hell

Those who are in hell will not complain of unfairness. While people will be upset that they are in hell, there is no example in Scripture of anyone claiming their suffering is unjust.

The people who end up in hell realize that the punishment they have received is fair. They deserve to go there and they know it.

Observation 10: Hell Is Payback For Those Who Have Rejected The Lord: It Is The Wages Of Sin

Finally, hell is something which unbelievers have earned through their sinful behavior. In other words, it is payback, retribution, for living a life apart from God. Paul said the wages of sin is death:

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

Therefore, hell is earned by those who do not put their faith in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, entrance to heaven is not earned. As this verse so clearly states, it is a free gift of God given to those who believe in Christ. Paul wrote elsewhere:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8,9 NIV).

Heaven is a gift, hell is earned. Indeed, it is “payback” for the sins committed against the Lord. As a place of punishment, there is no idea that hell will ever cease to exist or that the people will be reformed in hell to the place where they will be able to leave.

Observation 11: We Must Let People Know That Hell Exists

Since hell exists as an actual place where unbelievers will spend eternity, it is imperative that we warn people about it. Just as it would be cruel to not tell a person they were dying of a terminal disease; it is both cruel and deceptive if we let people think they will somehow escape God’s judgment and punishment if they reject Jesus Christ. They will not. While we may not like to teach the doctrine of hell, it is something we *must* do.

The Apostle Paul said the following to the Ephesians elders:

For I did not shrink back from declaring to you the whole plan of God (Acts 20:27 CSB).

We too are commanded to teach the entire plan of God. This includes the doctrine of everlasting punishment. It is our responsibility to proclaim it.

Observation 12: The Good News: Hell Can Be Avoided

We are also commanded to tell people the good news; there is forgiveness of sin through the Person of Jesus Christ! This is the message we are to proclaim. Nobody has to go to hell. Indeed, Jesus Christ has provided a means to escape the wrath of God by His death on the cross of Calvary.

Instead of the punishment of hell, people can spend eternity with the living God while experiencing the joys of heaven. This is the good news, the gospel!

Summary To Question 9

After Looking At The Totality Of Scripture, What Do We Discover About The Final Place Of Punishment For The Wicked? (Hell, The Lake Of Fire)

When we examine what the Bible has to say about the destiny of the wicked, we can make a number of conclusions about what has been taught.

First, we know that death is not the end of human existence. While it is the end of the functioning of our bodies here upon the earth, our spirit, or soul, will exist beyond this life. And if everyone will continue to exist, they must exist somewhere.

For the wicked, the place is known as hell. From Scripture we find that hell is an actual place of punishment. It does truly exist. It was not made for humanity, but rather it was created for the devil and his angels.

When God created the heavens and the earth, He created everything very good. After the angelic rebellion occurred, God made hell as a place to send these evil beings. It was not meant to be a place where humans would be sent.

Those who reject God's free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ will also be sent to hell, for heaven and hell are the only two places where humans will spend eternity. If people reject heaven, there is no other place for them to go.

We also discover from Scripture that those who actually go to hell will not complain that their punishment was unfair. Instead, they realize they are getting what they deserve. While they do not like to be in hell, they know that they belong there.

Finally, hell is something which earned. Indeed, it is the wages of sin. Salvation, however, is not earned but rather it is the free gift of God for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

In hell, people are punished for their sins. There is no idea of reforming or redeeming those who are there. They are lost forever.

While Christians may not like to preach the doctrine of hell, it is something which we must do. It is part of the overall plan of God.

The bad news is that hell exists. But the good news is that Jesus Christ has made a way where it can be avoided.

Question 10

Where Is Hell Located? Is It In The Center Of The Earth?

The Bible is clear that hell, the lake of fire, truly exists. Jesus spoke of this place of the final punishment of the wicked. In the Gospel of Matthew, we read of Jesus saying the following about the fate of those who rejected Him:

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’ (Matthew 25:41 ESV).

We know there will be a place where the wicked go for all eternity. This being the case, do we know where this place called hell is located?

Reasons Why Some Believe Hell Is In The Center Of The Earth

There are those who believe the Bible teaches the location of hell; it is in the center of the earth. There are a number of things in Scripture which seem to suggest this.

1. Hell Is Called The Underworld

The fact that hell is called the “underworld” gives the idea that it is located in the center of the earth, or beneath the surface of the earth. People are always said to have gone “down” to hell. This, among other things, has led to the belief that it is located somewhere in the heart of the earth.

2. The Earth Swallowed Up Korah

There is an Old Testament account of the earth swallowing up a man named Korah, as well as his evil followers. The Bible says:

The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, all Korah’s people, and all their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol with all that belonged to them. The earth closed over them, and they vanished from the assembly (Numbers 16:32-33 CSB).

The New King James Version puts it this way:

Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly (Numbers 16:32-33 NKJV).

Korah and his men are said to have gone down to their place of punishment, into Sheol, or the pit, when the earth swallowed them up. It has been suggested that “down to the pit” may mean that hell is below us.

Therefore, to some, this indicates that hell is located in the center of the earth.

3. Every Knee Under The Earth Will Bow To Jesus

Paul told the Philippians that someday everyone would bow to Jesus. This includes those *under* the earth. He wrote:

So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Philippians 2:10 CSB).

Since this passage refers to beings “under the earth” which will someday bow to Jesus, it seems to be another indication that hell is located in the center of the earth.

In addition, “under the earth” is contrasted to “heaven.” Since heaven is always spoken of as above, and this is the home of believers, under the earth seems to speak of hell, the home of unbelievers.

4. Jesus Descended To The Lowest Parts Of The Earth

Paul spoke of Jesus descending to the lower, or lowest parts of the earth, after He had died. He wrote the following to the Ephesians:

Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth (Ephesians 4:9 NKJV)

This is also understood by some people to refer to hell. They believe that Christ actually went to hell during the three days His body was in the grave. In hell, He spoke to the unbelieving dead.

Response To These Passages

While these passages have convinced some that hell is located in the center of the earth, the evidence is unconvincing for a number of reasons. They include the following.

1. These References Are Not To The Place Of Final Punishment

The main problem with using these passages to say that hell is located in the center of the earth is that hell, the place of final punishment, is not referred to in any of them.

Unbelievers who die, are now in a temporary place of punishment. It is called Sheol in the Old Testament and Hades in the New Testament. They are awaiting final judgment and then final punishment. What we typically think of as hell has not been populated yet, nobody is presently there. This will only occur at the Final Judgment, also known as the Last Judgment.

At that time, all unbelievers, angelic and human, will be cast into the lake of fire, hell. Consequently these passages that were cited refer to the temporary location of unbelievers.

2. There Will Be A New Heaven And A New Earth

There is something else which must be noted. After the Great White Throne Judgment occurs, and all unbelievers have been sent to the punishment of the lake of fire, namely hell, the Bible says that God will then create a new heaven and a new earth. We read about this new creation in the Book of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer (Revelation 21:1 CSB).

Scripture says that the first earth will pass away, God will destroy it. If God makes a new heaven and new earth, then hell cannot be part of that old earth which is destroyed. Hell is the eternal place of punishment; it will never pass away.

3. Christ Did Not Go To Hell When He Died

There is another misconception which needs to be cleared up. Jesus Christ did not spend three days in hell after His death. The meaning of the passage in Ephesians, which supposedly supports this idea, is debated.

In fact, it most likely does not even speak of Him going to the lower parts of the earth. The verse is better understood to mean that Christ went from heaven above, to the lower parts, namely, the earth itself.

In fact, a number of Bible translations view it this way. Consider the following ways in which these verses are rendered:

Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? (Ephesians 4:8,9 ESV).

Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he captured captives; he gave gifts to men.” Now what is the meaning of “he ascended,” except that he also descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth (Ephesians 4:8,9 NET)

That is why the Scriptures say, “When he ascended to the heights, he led a crowd of captives and gave gifts to his people.” Notice that it says “he ascended.” This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world. And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens (Ephesians 4:8-10 NLT)

When it says, “He went up,” what does it mean? It means that he first came down to the earth. So Jesus came down, and he is the same One

who went up above all the heaven (Ephesians 4:9,10 New Century Version).

Therefore, what we would have is a contrast between earth and heaven rather than a statement that Christ was in the lowest parts of the earth for three days. In sum, this passage does not say Christ went to hell when He died, or even to some physical place inside the surface of the earth.

4. The Dead Are Spirit-Beings

A final thing which should be noted is that these unrighteous dead are presently spirit beings. In other words, they do not seem to have any physical or corporeal form at the moment. If they do, it is not described for us.

Therefore, their location is most likely not in some geographical spot which we can discover. In other words, they cannot be located at some spot on a map. Indeed, they exist in another dimension, the unseen realm of the dead, a dimension that we know next to nothing of.

In sum, the Bible has no interest in telling us their present location except to say that they are in the unseen world of the dead. We should leave it at that.

Where Then Is Hell Located?

As we have emphasized, the exact location of Gehenna, that is hell, the lake of fire, is not specifically stated in Scripture. There have been two major views as to the exact location of the final destination of the wicked.

Option 1 It Is A Special Place For The Wicked

There are many who believe that there will be one special place in the universe where God will confine evil humanity along with the fallen angels. In some remote corner of the universe, all of the evil beings will be kept forever in this unnamed place.

Option 2 It Will Be Made From The Old Earth

We saw that the Bible taught that when Christ comes back He will make a new heaven and new earth. There are some who believe that He will somehow use the old, fallen earth to be the place of confinement for the wicked.

Since Satan has always wanted to have this planet for himself, he, along with all those who followed his evil ways, will get their wish. The fallen corrupt earth will become their everlasting jail house.

The problem with this view is that people are sent to hell or the lake of fire *before* the new earth is made and the old earth is destroyed. Since hell will not be destroyed, it does not seem to make any sense that it would be made of some part of the old earth.

While we do not really know where the final place of the wicked is located, we do know that it is a place where nobody wants to be.

Summary To Question 10
Where Is Hell Located? Is It In The Center Of The Earth?

The Bible says that the wicked will be sent away from the presence of the Lord to a place of everlasting punishment. The exact location of the final destination of all evil humans and angels is not stated in Scripture. This has not stopped people from speculating as to its location.

Some people have assumed that the Bible gives us a number of clues which indicate that hell is in the center of the earth. For one thing, the realm of the dead is always spoken of as being under the ground. This, it is argued, tells us the location of hell.

Furthermore, when God judged Korah and his family during the time of Moses, the earth swallowed them up. There have been those who have thought that this indicated they went directly to hell.

In addition, when Paul wrote to the Philippians, he said that everyone under the earth would eventually confess Jesus Christ as Lord. This has been understood to be a reference to the inhabitants of hell.

Finally, Paul told the Ephesians that Jesus descended to the lowest parts of the earth. This has been understood to mean that upon His death, His spirit went to hell and preached to the inhabitants there.

These arguments have convinced a number of people that hell is located somewhere in the center of the earth.

However, these arguments do no such thing. Indeed, it cannot be shown from Scripture that hell is located in the center of the earth.

For one thing, none of these references are to the place we know as hell. Hell is empty right now. It will not be populated until the return of Jesus Christ to the earth. Unbelieving humans will not be sent there until after the Last Judgment.

Furthermore, after the last judgment, and the people are sent to hell, the old earth is then destroyed when the Lord creates a new heaven and a new earth. Hell, therefore, could not be located on the destroyed old earth because hell is eternal. Indeed, we are told that the lake of fire burns forever.

In addition, the passage in Ephesians has nothing to do with Christ preaching to souls in hell. Hell was not in existence at that time.

There is something else we must appreciate. These verses may be better understood as a simple reference of Jesus coming to the earth from heaven.

In other words, it is speaking about the time when God the Son became a human being and came to our earth. It has nothing to do with preaching to those in the unseen realm. Consequently, these verses should not be used to attempt to determine the location of hell.

Finally, we must recognize that the unbelieving dead are spirits. It is not clear whether they actually have some type of temporary body. This being the case, we should not look for them in some specific geographic place in the universe. They are probably in an entirely different dimension.

As far as exactly where hell, or the lake of fire, will actually be located, we simply do not know. It may be in a special place in the universe.

Ultimately, we do not know where the unbelieving humans and angels will reside, but we do know it will be away from God's goodness.

Question 11

What Is The Nature Of The Punishment Of The Wicked?

The Bible says the wicked will be punished in the future. They cannot escape the judgment that God has for them. From what the Bible says with respect to the nature of the punishment in hell, we can make the following observations.

1. They Are Sent Out From God's Presence

Hell can be defined as the total absence of the goodness of God. Those in hell are sent out from God's blessed presence. In other words, people in hell are deprived of everything good. This includes God, His holy angels, the other righteous spirit-beings, and the righteous believers.

On Judgment Day, Jesus said that He wanted the evil people away from His Holy presence. Luke records Him saying:

But he will tell you, 'I don't know who you are. Get away from me, all you evil people' (Luke 13:27 God's Word).

He never knew them in a spiritual sense. They were never His children.

The Apostle Paul also said that the wicked will be sent away from the presence of the Lord. He wrote the following to the Thessalonians:

They will be punished with everlasting destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power (2 Thessalonians 1:9 NLT).

The unbelievers will be sent away from the wonderful presence of a holy God and will be forever separated from Him and His goodness.

2. They Will Remain Sinful

Those in hell will remain sinful for all eternity. In other words, their character will not improve. The Bible says the following in the Book of Revelation:

Let those who don't have God's approval go without it, and let filthy people continue to be filthy. Let those who have God's approval continue to have it, and let holy people continue to be holy (Revelation 22:11 God's Word).

Hell, therefore, will not be a place where individuals are reformed and made into better people. Instead, it is a place where people are punished.

3. There Is The Infliction Of Suffering

Whether the words are to be understood literally or symbolically, those in hell will indeed suffer. Jesus told the story of the rich man who was in

Hades, awaiting the final judgment and punishment of hell. He explained his situation as follows:

In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire’ (Luke 16:23,24 NIV).

The place of punishment will be a place of suffering. Later in Jesus’ story, we find that the place where the rich man was held, Hades, was called a place of torment. We read these solemn words from him:

For I have five brothers, and I want him to warn them about this place of torment so they won’t have to come here when they die (Luke 16:28 NLT)

The temporary place of punishment is a place of torment. Likewise, hell will also be a place where the unbelievers are tormented. There is no getting around this truth.

4. Their Suffering Will Be Proportionate To Their Sin

The suffering in hell is proportionate to the sin each person has committed. When Jesus sent out His disciples to preach to the cities of Israel, He said told them what would happen to any city that rejected their message:

I can guarantee this truth: Judgment day will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that city (Matthew 10:15 God’s Word).

The judgment, and then the punishment, will be more difficult for that city, who rejected the message of Jesus, than it will be for the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Later, Jesus expressed the same thought. He said the following to one of the cities in His day which witnessed His great miracles, but refused to believe in Him:

Then Jesus denounced the cities where he had worked most of his miracles because they had not changed the way they thought and acted. “How horrible it will be for you, Chorazin! How horrible it will be for you, Bethsaida! If the miracles worked in you had been worked in Tyre and Sidon, they would have changed the way they thought and acted long ago in sackcloth and ashes. I can guarantee that judgment day will be better for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to heaven? No, you will go down to hell! If the miracles that had been worked in you had been worked in Sodom, it would still be there today. I can guarantee that judgment day will be better for Sodom than for you (Matthew 11:20-24 God’s Word).

This indicates that there will be degrees of punishment in hell. In other words, some people will suffer more than others. However, all will suffer.

5. There Is Loss Of All

Those who die in unbelief will lose everything. This is contrasted to the believer who will be blessed in abundance. Jesus said:

For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away (Matthew 25:29 ESV).

Note the contrast between the two. One will have an abundance, and whatever the other one has, it will be taken away. Those who go to hell will lose everything. All will be lost.

6. The People Will Retain Their Memories

In His story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus taught that the rich man, who was suffering in torment, retained his memory. For one thing, he knew who he was, as well as where he was. He also remembered Lazarus. We read of him asking for Lazarus to come and help him in his torment:

And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame (Luke 16:24 ESV).

He also remembered he had five brothers who were still alive:

‘Father,’ he said, ‘then I beg you to send him to my father’s house—because I have five brothers—to warn them, so they won’t also come to this place of torment’ (Luke 16:27-28 CSB).

This will make hell all the more agonizing. The people will retain the memory of what could have been.

7. The Lost Don’t Want Their Loved Ones To Join Them

Interestingly, the rich man in Jesus’ story did not want his five brothers to join him in the temporary place of the evil dead, Hades, or for that matter, in the permanent place, hell. In fact, he was so concerned over the fate of his brothers, who were still living at that time, that he asked to have Lazarus sent back to warn them. This seems to indicate that those who are destined to hell are concerned over the fate of their loved ones.

8. It Will Be A Place Of Unquenchable Fire

Finally, we find that the place of final punishment, hell, is described as a place of unquenchable fire. Jesus put it this way:

If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out! It is better to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched (Mark 9:47-48 NET)

Whether the unquenchable fire is to be understood literally or not, the Bible is still describing a place of absolute misery.

Taken together, these descriptions of hell reveal that it will be a place of misery, agony, and loneliness. It is a place where nobody should desire to go. Indeed, it is a place where nobody needs to go. Jesus Christ saw to that by His death on Calvary.

Summary To Question 11

What Is Nature Of The Punishment Of The Wicked In Hell?

The Scripture gives certain details with respect to the punishment of the wicked dead. We can summarize what it says as follows.

The Bible says they will be cast out of the presence of God. In other words, they are separated from Him and everything which is good.

As they are sent out of God's presence, unbelievers will remain sinful forever. There is no idea of reforming them, or making them better people.

In addition, Scripture says that they will suffer in this place of punishment proportionately to their sin. While all will be punished, this means that some will suffer greater punishment than others.

Everything they had in this life will be lost. People do not bring anything with them to hell. However, the people will retain memories of their previous life. Indeed, they will not want their loved ones to join them in the darkness and unquenchable fire. Yet, in hell, they are not able to do anything about it. They cannot warn their loved ones who are upon the earth.

When everything is considered, we find that hell will be a dreadful punishment that everyone should want to avoid. The good news is that it can be avoided. Indeed, one simply has to put their faith in Jesus Christ!

Question 12

What Is The Length Of Punishment In Hell? Is It Everlasting?

The Scripture teaches that there is a place of punishment for the wicked. It also tells us the length of time that people will be punished, it is everlasting, it will never end. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. The evidence is as follows.

The Old Testament References To Final Judgment

The number of references in the Old Testament is small with respect to the length of the punishment of the unbeliever. The emphasis is on the destiny of the righteous. The only Old Testament passage that clearly speaks of the duration of punishment is found in the Book of Daniel. In it, we read the following about the destiny of the wicked:

Many of those who sleep in the dusty ground will awake-some to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting abhorrence (Daniel 12:2 NET).

Some argue that everlasting abhorrence, or everlasting contempt, does not mean they will suffer forever. God's contempt for them could be shown by their everlasting destruction, or annihilation. This is a possible, but not a necessary understanding of this passage.

The fact that they are raised from the dead suggests more than mere annihilation. However, in and of itself, this passage does not specifically teach everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked.

The New Testament References To The Length Of Punishment

The New Testament does speak of the length of punishment of the wicked. The Greek adjective *aionios*, translated "eternal" or "everlasting," describes the punishment of the wicked.

When used in the New Testament, the word can have one of three different meanings.

1. The Word Translated Eternal Can Mean Eternity Past (Before Time Began)

The word that is translated as "eternal" sometimes means something that happened in eternity past or before time began. For example, Paul wrote to Timothy about the grace that Jesus has revealed:

He is the one who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not based on our works but on his own purpose and grace, granted to us in Christ Jesus before time began (2 Timothy 1:9 NET).

The New International Version puts it this way:

He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time (2 Timothy 1:9 NIV).

The phrase, “before time began” or “before the beginning of time” is a translation of the Greek word *aionios*. The Greek literally says, “before eternal times.”

To Titus, he wrote about God’s promises before the world began:

In hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the ages began (Titus 1:2 NET).

Therefore, this particular word can mean “before the world began” or “before the ages began” when it is used in certain contexts.

In other words, it refers to eternity past.

2. The Word Can Mean Without Beginning Or End

The word *aionios* can also mean “without beginning or end.” For example, God did not have a beginning, and He will not have an end. In this sense, He is eternal.

God Had No Beginning Or End

The Apostle Paul spoke God as being eternal. He had no beginning and will have no end. The Greek word *aionios*, in two places, describes the eternity of God. When he wrote to the Romans, he described him as the “everlasting God.”

God can strengthen you by the Good News and the message I tell about Jesus Christ. He can strengthen you by revealing the mystery that was kept in silence for a very long time but now is publicly known. The everlasting God ordered that what the prophets wrote must be shown to the people of every nation to bring them to the obedience that is associated with faith (Romans 16:25,26 God’s Word).

In this instance, the word is certainly indicating that the Lord is “eternal” in His nature. Paul wrote the following to Timothy:

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17 CSB).

Also in this context, *aionios* refers to the fact that the Lord has no beginning or end. In other words, He is eternal or everlasting.

There Is No Beginning Or End Of The Holy Spirit

The writer of the Hebrews said that the Holy Spirit is eternal in nature. He had no beginning, and He will have no end. We read:

The blood of Christ, who had no defect, does even more. Through the eternal Spirit he offered himself to God and cleansed our consciences from the useless things we had done. Now we can serve the living God (Hebrews 9:14 God's Word).

Therefore, the word translated eternal can have this particular meaning of “without beginning or end.”

3. The Word Can Mean Without End (Unending In The Future)

Without end, is another possible meaning of the term. It speaks of eternity in the future. There are a number of times that it is used this way in Scripture.

Punishment Is Everlasting (Without End)

Jesus was very explicit on this issue of the length of the punishment of the wicked; the punishment will be everlasting. We read in Matthew:

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire (Matthew 18:8 NIV).

The fire is eternal. It never goes out.

Jesus compared the punishment of the wicked to an undying worm as well as an undying fire. Mark records Him saying:

Where the worm never dies and the fire never goes out (Mark 9:48 NLT)

This is a further reference to the everlasting nature of the punishment.

In another context, Jesus made it clear that the punishment was forever. He contrasted the fate of the righteous with the fate of the wicked:

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:46 ESV).

We should note that the same word that describes the happy or blessed state of the righteous also describes the terrible state of the wicked, eternal. If the joys of heaven are eternal, so is the condemnation of hell. If the future life of the believer is eternal, then so is the punishment of the unbeliever. There is no getting around this.

The concept of endless duration could not be more strongly conveyed. In fact, the use of these expressions for the eternity of God shows conclusively that they do not mean limited duration.

There Are Bible Believers Who See It Differently

However, there are believers who do not think that the Lord is talking about the duration of the punishment in hell, but rather that the punishment will be eternal in its effect. Consequently, they believe the unrighteous will be annihilated, they will not suffer for all eternity, but their punishment will be eternal in the sense that it cannot be reversed.

In our next section, we will deal with this particular argument made by those who deny the Bible speaks of eternal conscious punishment for the lost.

There Is No Forgiveness Ever

The eternal duration of the punishment in hell is further confirmed with this fact; there is no forgiveness ever for those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. Mark records what the Lord said about the fate of those who blasphemed God's Spirit:

But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin (Mark 3:29 ESV).

Forgiveness is "never" possible for those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Indeed, they will never have any hope whatsoever of receiving the Lord's forgiveness.

Paul Spoke Of Eternal Destruction

The Apostle Paul wrote about the eternal destruction of the wicked. He said that it will be eternal or without end. We read:

Their punishment will be eternal destruction, and they will be kept far from the presence of our Lord and his glorious strength (2 Thessalonians 1:9 CEV).

The New Century Version translates the verse as follows:

They will undergo the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his strength (2 Thessalonians 1:9 NET).

Among other things, their punishment will consist of being banished from God's presence as well as all of the blessings which are associated with it.

The word "destruction" in this context does not mean "annihilated" or "cease to exist." We will discuss this later as we examine the idea that those who are sent to hell are eventually annihilated.

John Wrote About Everlasting Punishment

In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John also wrote about everlasting punishment. He referred to it in the following way:

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, 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 And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name” (Revelation 14:9-11 ESV).

This is further testimony to the nature of the punishment of the wicked. There is no end to their punishment. Indeed, three things describe them, they will be tormented forever, They will be tormented day and night, and they will never have any rest.

Unbelievers Are Thrown In The Same Lake Of Fire As The Devil

The fact that the suffering is eternal can also be seen by comparing Scripture with Scripture. We find that unbelievers are thrown into the same lake of fire as the devil and his angels, his demonic followers. Jesus said the following:

Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons’ (Matthew 25:41 NLT).

The lake of fire is a place of eternal torment. It does not burn itself out. This is clearly spelled out in the Book of Revelation:

Then the devil, who had deceived them, was thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, joining the beast and the false prophet. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 NLT).

Those in the lake of fire have no rest, they suffer eternally. This is the destiny awaiting those who reject Jesus Christ.

An Eternal Hell Is A Difficult Doctrine

No one denies that the doctrine of an eternal hell is difficult. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that this will be the final destination of those who reject Jesus Christ and His free gift of salvation.

Consequently, we accept as true the idea that the wicked will suffer eternal, conscious torment away from the living God, because the Bible says so.

Summary To Question 12
What Is The Length Of Punishment In Hell? Is It Everlasting?

From Scripture, we find that the length of punishment of the wicked is everlasting. In other words, there is no end to it.

In the Book of Daniel, we are told that the wicked dead are awakened to “shame and everlasting contempt.” This indicates the nature of their punishment but it does not clearly specify the duration of it. It is from the New Testament that we discover the punishment of the wicked is of eternal duration.

In the New Testament, the Greek word used to describe hell has the idea of “without end.” We find that Jesus, Paul, and John spoke of everlasting punishment for unbelievers. This punishment is without end. When all the evidence is considered, there is no getting around this fact.

Furthermore, the Book of Revelation says that the unbelievers are thrown into the same lake of fire as the devil and his angels. It is described as a place of eternal, conscious, torment from which there is no rest. Therefore, like the devil, they will spend eternity in a place from which there is no relief, and no end.

This is what the Bible says will occur to those who have rejected Jesus Christ as Savior. Refusing to believe what the Bible has to say about the matter will not change the facts.

Eternal punishment for the wicked, while admittedly a difficult doctrine, is a reality. Indeed, the Bible makes it clear that such a place as hell exists.

Question 13

What Terms Does The Bible Use To Describe Hell, Or Everlasting Punishment?

The Bible says that the wicked will be punished for all eternity. The popular description of this place is “hell.” The place of everlasting punishment has a number of descriptive terms in Scripture. They include the following.

1. It Is The Place Where The Body And Soul Of The Wicked Will Go

Jesus warned the people of His day that they were not to fear humans, but rather to fear God. He alone has the ability to send both the body and the soul to hell. We read.

Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell
(Matthew 10:28 NLT)

The place of final punishment is also known as the place where the souls of the wicked are sent. This is how Jesus described hell. In this context, the soul describes the invisible part of us, the part which has been made for eternity. Only God can send the soul to hell.

2. It Is Called A Fiery (Blazing) Furnace

The term “fiery or blazing furnace” is used as a description of the future punishment of the lost. We read Jesus saying:

The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:4142 NIV).

A blazing furnace is an explicit picture of the final punishment. It is something which everyone can readily understand.

In Scripture, we find that death by fire was the severest penalty under the Jewish law, and it was only inflicted for the most shameful sins. Moses wrote about this in the Book of Leviticus. He put it this way:

If a man marries both a woman and her mother, it is wicked. Both he and they must be burned in the fire, so that no wickedness will be among you (Leviticus 20:14 NIV)

This was the harshest of punishment for the vilest of crimes.

In another place, Moses wrote about this punishment:

If a priest’s daughter becomes a prostitute, defiling her father’s holiness as well as herself, she must be burned to death (Leviticus, 21:9 NLT).

This was a horrible death for a horrible sin.

In the Book of Joshua, the punishment of fire was pronounced upon a man named Achan and his family for committing a terrible sin against the Lord. Scripture records it this way.

Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today.” Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them (Joshua 7:25 NIV).

The punishment of fire was familiar to the Jews. It seems to have been reserved for the worst offenders. Therefore, when Jesus spoke of the “fire, or blazing furnace, of hell,” His audience was well-acquainted with what He meant.

3. The Place Of Unquenchable (Never-ending) Fire

Not only is hell a place fire, it is a place of unquenchable, or never-ending, fire. Therefore, the fires of hell never cease. John the Baptist gave the following comparison:

He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire (Matthew 3:12 NLT).

He compared unbelievers to the chaff which is burned with fire that never ceases.

Jesus also emphasized that the fires of hell never cease. It is eternal fire:

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire (Matthew 18:8 NIV).

The same truth is taught elsewhere in the New Testament. Jude spoke of the unceasing or eternal fire of hell:

We should also be warned by what happened to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and the nearby towns. Their people became immoral and did all sorts of sexual sins. Then God made an example of them and punished them with eternal fire (Jude 7 CEV).

The fire is never quenched, it never goes out. This is what the Bible has to say on the subject.

4. It Is A Place Of Weeping And Grinding Of Teeth

Hell is a place where the wicked cry and gnash, or grind, their teeth. Jesus described the punishment in this manner:

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom everything that causes sin as well as all lawbreakers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:41-42 NET).

The place of punishment is known as a place of gnashing or grinding of teeth. This speaks of the agony they will experience while being punished. It also speaks of conscious torment. There is no end to the suffering.

5. It Is A Place Of No Rest

Hell is a place where there is no rest for the wicked dead. We read the following in the Book of Revelation about the punishment they will receive:

The smoke from their torture will go up forever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast or its statue, or for anyone branded with its name (Revelation 14:11 God's Word).

There is no rest for the wicked, none. Their punishment continues for as long as they exist. Unfortunately, for them it is forever.

6. It Is A Place Of Condemnation

Hell is a place of condemnation of the wicked. Matthew records Jesus saying the following:

I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account (for every careless word they speak. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned (Matthew 12:36,37 CSB).

Since hell is where the wicked are condemned, there is no reward awaiting them in this place of punishment. No matter how much good they may have done in this life, it does not matter.

Indeed, they are condemned to hell. No rewards, only condemnation.

7. It Is A Place Of Ruin, Destruction

The place of final judgment is also a place of ruin or destruction. Paul wrote of this to the Philippians:

Without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God (Philippians 1:28 NIV).

On the one hand, there is salvation for those “in Christ” while on the other hand destruction, or ruin, awaits the wicked. The contrasts could not be greater.

Jesus said the road to hell leads to destruction. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible records Him saying:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it (Matthew 7:13,14 NIV).

Destruction means the unbelievers will receive complete loss or ruin, it does not mean annihilation or non-existence. They will not cease to exist.

8. It Is A Place Of Separation From God's Presence

Unbelievers will be separated from God's presence. Paul wrote of this when he explained the return of Jesus Christ:

And God will provide rest for you who are being persecuted and also for us when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven. He will come with his mighty angels in flaming fire, bringing judgment on those who don't know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 NLT).

Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are not allowed in His presence. For forever and ever, they will be apart from Him. The joy and satisfaction of being in the presence of God will never be theirs. They are eternally separated from the presence of the Lord.

9. It Is Described As Outer Darkness

In Scripture, darkness is usually associated with evil. Future punishment is described as a place of outer darkness, or complete darkness. In comparing Gentiles who believed in Him as opposed to Jews who rejected Him, Jesus said:

But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12 NIV).

The subjects of the kingdom, the Jews, should be the ones who inherit the promised kingdom. Instead, many of them will experience this complete darkness where there will be pain and suffering. Jesus' listeners, the Jews, clearly understood these images.

In a parable of our Lord, Jesus spoke of the fate of a useless servant. That person was going to experience the outer darkness:

Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30 NLT).

There is no light in this place of punishment. Absence of light means the absence of the loving presence of the Lord.

10. It Is A Lake Of Burning Sulfur

Scripture also says that the suffering of the wicked will take place in a lake of burning sulfur. We read of this in the Book of Revelation:

But the beast was taken prisoner, and along with him the false prophet, who had performed the signs in his presence. He deceived those who accepted the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image with these signs. Both of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur (Revelation 19:20 CSB).

The lake is compared to burning sulfur.

Jude talked about snatching those from the fire:

And have mercy on those who waver; save others by snatching them out of the fire; have mercy on others, coupled with a fear of God, hating even the clothes stained by the flesh (Jude 22,23 NET).

The fiery judgment of hell is real! This is why the emphasis on saving them from the fire.

11. There Will Be Eternal Suffering

Finally, we read of the most horrific part of the judgment. The suffering in this place will be eternal. It will never end. Jesus said:

And these will depart into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:46 NET).

The suffering of the wicked is eternal, there is no end to it.

Conclusion: Hell Is Real And It Is Horrific

From the various descriptions that we find in Scripture of hell, the lake of fire, the final judgment, we discover it is an actual place, and a horrific place. Nobody should want to end up in hell.

Again, we repeat the good news is that people do not have to go to hell. Jesus Christ died so that each of us could spend eternity with Him in heaven. The choice is ours.

Summary To Question 13 What Terms Does The Bible Use To Describe Hell, Or Everlasting Punishment?

Those who reject the truth of the God of the Bible will be punished. This place of punishment, hell, where the wicked go after the final judgment, is described for us in a number of ways in Scripture. They are as follows.

To begin with, hell is an actual place where the spirits or souls of the unbelievers are sent. We are dealing with reality, not symbolism or mythology.

Fire in Scripture often speaks of judgment, and hell is called a fiery or blazing furnace. Furthermore, we also discover that this fire in hell never burns out. In other words, hell fire is eternal.

In addition, Scripture describes hell as a place of weeping and grinding of teeth. This speaks of the misery which is attached to such a place of punishment.

The Bible also calls hell a place of no rest for the wicked. Indeed, the punishment is continual. There is no let up, no stopping the judgment.

The judgment of hell is one of condemnation or punishment for unbelief. Nobody is reformed in hell, neither is their character improved.

Hell is called a place of destruction. Everything about the wicked is destroyed or ruined. This does not, however, mean they are annihilated.

In hell, the wicked are separated from the holy presence of the Lord. This place of separation is also called outer darkness. It is the absence of God's goodness which means it is the absence of light. He is represented in Scripture as light while those apart from Him walk in darkness.

We also find hell called the lake of fire, or the "second death." This is eternal death. There is no end to this separation between the unrighteous person and the Lord.

These are sobering reminders of what awaits those who do not believe in the God of Scripture. Suffering in hell will be in intense anguish. People in hell will be isolated from everything else. They will realize they have been permanently cut off from God and everything good.

It is a place where nobody should wish to be, and a place where nobody has to be. Jesus Christ died so people do not have to go to hell. If one chooses hell, it is because they have rejected Jesus.

Question 14

What Is Tartarus?

There are a number of Greek terms used in the New Testament for different places in the unseen realm of the dead. Many English translations unfortunately translate all of them as “hell.”

One of these Greek words is “Tartarus.” What exactly is Tartarus? Who goes to this place? Is it the place of final judgment for the wicked? What does the Bible have to say?

Tartars Was The Lowest Level Of The Underworld

In Greek mythology, *Tartarus* spoke of the lowest levels of the underworld, the place where the worst criminals were kept under confinement. This word is only used once in the entire New Testament.

1. It Is A Place For Sinning Angels

Peter uses the word “Tartarus” in referring to a place of confinement for evil angels, namely the angels who originally sinned against the Lord. We read the following account in Second Peter:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment (2 Peter 2:4 NIV).

The phrase “sent them into hell” is a translation of the Greek word *Tartarus*. Peter says that the Lord will *tartarize* these fallen angels. As we mentioned, this is the only New Testament use of the term.

From our understanding of the totality of Scripture, we can conclude that it is a temporary place, where certain fallen angels who previously sinned are now confined.

These angels may be particularly evil and consequently are not allowed any contact with other spiritual beings or humans.

It Is Not The Place Of Final Punishment

Though the word is often translated as “hell” in English versions, this really gives the wrong idea. In popular understanding, hell is a term associated with the “final destination” of the wicked, the place of everlasting punishment.

Unbelieving humanity and rebellious angels will be cast into hell. Tartarus is not the same place. It is a temporary place of confinement, not their final destination.

The Christian Standard Bible does not translate the word. Instead it uses the word “Tartarus” untranslated:

For if God didn't spare the angels who sinned, but threw them down into Tartarus and delivered them to be kept in chains of darkness until judgment (2 Peter 2:4 CSB).

This way of rendering the verse is also preferable to naming the place "hell." Indeed, when this place is referred to as hell, it only causes confusion. It is not the place of final punishment for these evil angels.

In fact, the passage clearly states that these angels are kept there "until judgment" or "held for judgment." In other words, judgment for them, as well has their eventual punishment, has not yet taken place.

2. Jude Spoke Of The Same Place

The New Testament writer Jude also speaks about this place for sinning angels. He calls it a place of everlasting chains and utter darkness. He put it this way:

You also know that the angels who did not keep within their proper domain but abandoned their own place of residence, he has kept in eternal chains in utter darkness, locked up for the judgment of the great Day (Jude 6 NET).

This is another description of this temporary place of confinement.

Tartarus And The Abyss

It is possible that Tartarus is the same place as the abyss, also known as the bottomless pit. According to Scripture, certain evil angelic beings are being kept locked up until the Day of Judgment. At that time, they will be thrown into the lake of fire. When this occurs, all of these temporary places will cease to exist. The Bible says:

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14 ESV)

Therefore, Tartarus should not be understood as any place of punishment for wicked humans. It is reserved for sinning angels.

Consequently, "hell" is an unfortunate translation of this word because it gives the readers the impression that this is a permanent place of confinement. It is not.

Summary To Question 14 What Is Tartarus?

In the New Testament, certain angels who have sinned are now confined to a place called "Tartarus." This specific Greek word is only used once in the New Testament. It has no reference to the final destination of the wicked, what has been historically understood as hell. Tartarus is not the final destination of the lost.

Unfortunately, many English versions translate the word Tartarus as “hell.” This gives the impression that those in Tartarus will never leave this place. This assumption is not correct.

Tartarus is not even the final destination of sinning angels. According to Scripture, Tartarus will someday be done away with at the “last judgment.” Along with everything else temporary, it will be thrown into the lake of fire.

It is possible that Tartarus can be linked to the bottomless pit, the abyss. This too is a place of temporary confinement.

It is, therefore, unfortunate that some English versions translate the term as “hell” because it confuses it with the place of final punishment of the wicked humans as well as the evil angels.

Question 15

What Is Gehenna?

One of the Greek words, that is often translated as hell is “Gehenna.” This term is used twelve times in the New Testament, with Jesus employing it eleven times. What is Gehenna? Is it a temporary place of punishment, or is it the final place? Who goes to Gehenna? Is it humans or angels? What does the Scripture say?

1. It Is The Valley Of Hinnom In Jerusalem

To begin with, the term Gehenna is derived from the Hebrew *ge hinnom* or the “valley of Hinnom.” Hinnom was probably the name of a person in ancient Israel. The valley of Hinnom is a deep narrow glen just outside of Jerusalem.

2. It Was The Place Of Child Sacrifices

In Old Testament times, Gehenna had been the location of child-sacrifices under some of the godless kings of Israel. The prophet Jeremiah wrote about this place. He called it the high places of Tophet, or Topheth:

And they have built the high places of Tophet, which *is* in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart (Jeremiah 7:31 NKJV).

This horrible place was the location of child sacrifices. The children were sacrificed to the false god Molech. The image of Molech had the head of a bull with outstretched arms. A fire burned in the stomach of the idol while the child was placed in the arms and then sacrificed. It was a dreadful place.

3. King Ahaz Permitted Child Sacrifice

The valley of Hinnom was where King Ahaz sacrificed his own children. Speaking of this evil king, the Bible says:

He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his children in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites (2 Chronicles 28:3 NIV).

Ahaz made his own sons pass through this horrible place of human sacrifice. This was an absolute abomination to the Lord!

4. King Manasseh Allowed Child Sacrifice

The same detestable thing occurred in the reign of the evil king Manasseh of Judah. Scripture says of him:

He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums

and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger (2 Chronicles 33:6 CSB).

These practices were abominable to the Lord. Indeed, Scripture says this type of behavior made Him extremely angry.

5. The Lord Pronounced Judgment On This Place

Jeremiah the prophet predicted that divine justice would strike this valley of Hinnom where these abominable things were taking place. He recorded the following words of the Lord:

So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room (Jeremiah 7:32 NIV).

This valley of Topheth, the valley of Hinnom, would be renamed as the “valley of slaughter,” because the Lord would bring His justice to this evil place. This is key in understanding the later use of this term.

6. These Abominations Were Stopped By King Josiah

During the reign of the good King Josiah of Judah, the sacrifices were stopped. We read of this in Kings:

He defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of Hinnom, so that no one could make his son or daughter pass through the fire to Molech (2 Kings 23:10 CSB).

Josiah, as a godly king, rightly stopped these abominations.

7. Jesus Spoke Of Gehenna As A Place Of Punishment

By the times of Christ, Gehenna was symbolized by fire, smoke, and divine judgment. Jesus used the symbolism of Gehenna to describe the final place of punishment for the wicked, or hell. He said the following about the coming judgment:

And if your hand causes your downfall, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell—the unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43 CSB).

The word translated “hell” in this verse is the Greek word “Gehenna.” Notice the Lord called this place, “the unquenchable fire.” The translation, God’s Word, puts it this way.

So if your hand causes you to lose your faith, cut it off! It is better for you to enter life disabled than to have two hands and go to hell, to the fire that cannot be put out (Mark 9:43 God’s Word).

It is a fire which “cannot be put out.”

The Lord also spoke of Gehenna in this manner:

But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him (Luke 12:5 NIV).

The only One who has the power to throw someone into hell, or Gehenna, is the Lord Himself. He is the One whom people should be afraid of.

Jesus said that the entire person, body and soul, would be cast into Gehenna:

Don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28 CSB).

The punishment to which Jesus is referring is much worse than physical death. Indeed, it is eternal separation from the Lord.

Our Lord spoke concerning Gehenna, not only to warn people, but also to condemn the hypocritical religious leaders. Jesus gave the following assessment of these hypocrites who misled the people of His day:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to make one proselyte, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as fit for hell as you are! (Matthew 23:15 CSB).

The Contemporary English Version renders this verse as follows:

You Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses are in for trouble! You're nothing but show-offs. You travel over land and sea to win one follower. And when you have done so, you make that person twice as fit for hell as you are (Matthew 23:15 CEV).

We learn a number of things about the final place of punishment from the teachings of Jesus. The punishment in Gehenna is unending and the fire is unquenchable, it never goes out. Both the body and the soul are thrown into Gehenna. This means the total person goes there.

8. Gehenna Was Outside The Holy City

The symbolism of Gehenna is also found in its location. Gehenna is a place outside the city of Jerusalem. The ultimate fate of the wicked is suffering outside of the gates of the New Jerusalem. We read in the Book of Revelation:

Blessed are those who wash their robes so they can enter through the gates of the city and eat the fruit from the tree of life. Outside the city are the dogs--the sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idol worshipers, and all who love to live a lie (Revelation 22:14,15 NLT).

In this passage we have a reference to an actual place “outside” of the Holy City. This is the idea behind Gehenna.

9. Gehenna Is Different Than Hades

It is important that we realize that Gehenna is not Hades. Hades is a temporary place of the dead, where only their souls exist. In Gehenna, the wicked dead exist in both body and soul. The punishment in Gehenna is eternal while the suffering in Hades is temporal. Consequently when the Bible speaks about Gehenna and Hades, it is referring to two different places.

10. Gehenna Is Presently Unoccupied

Since Gehenna, hell, is the place of the final punishment of the wicked, it is presently unoccupied. In the future, when God judges the wicked angels, along with evil humanity, then hell, or Gehenna, will become inhabited. It is also called the second death and the lake of fire. We read of this coming judgment in the Book of Revelation:

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10-15 NIV)

At some time in the future, the wicked dead will be raised and then judged. The same holds true for the evil angels.

Consequently, when this final judgment occurs, Gehenna will then receive its inhabitants. The entire person, body and soul, will be cast into Gehenna, the place of everlasting punishment.

This sums up what the Bible has to say about the final destination of wicked humans and angels, Gehenna, the lake of fire.

Summary To Question 15 What Is Gehenna?

Gehenna is the biblical term for what we commonly refer to as hell. It is the place of final punishment for unrighteous angels and humans. From Scripture, we can make the following observations about this place.

Gehenna means the “valley of Hinnom.” It is an actual valley south of the city of Jerusalem. It was also called the valley of Topheth. It was probably named after a person who once existed.

In the dark days of Israel’s past, Gehenna was used as a place of child sacrifice. King Ahaz murdered children in this place when he offered sacrifices to the false god Molech. The evil King Manasseh did likewise.

The prophet Jeremiah predicted this place of abomination would itself experience the judgment of the Lord. These words came true as Jeremiah foretold. It was the good king of Judah, Josiah, who stopped the sacrifices in Gehenna.

Jesus used Gehenna as an illustration of the final punishment of the wicked. In fact, with only one exception, every New Testament use of the word Gehenna comes from the lips of the Lord Jesus.

From the teaching of Jesus, we learn that Gehenna is the permanent place of punishment where both the body and the soul of unbelievers are reunited. In Gehenna, they will spend eternity apart from the living God. It is the final destination of wicked humans as well as the evil angels.

Gehenna, therefore, should not be confused with Hades. Hades is temporary, Gehenna is permanent. At the Last Judgment, Hades will be cast into the lake of fire, Gehenna. It will cease to exist.

According to the Book of Revelation, Gehenna, the place of everlasting punishment, is located outside the New Jerusalem, the Holy City where believers will be forever with the Lord.

Gehenna, the place of final punishment, is also known as the “lake of fire,” and the “second death.” Gehenna, therefore, is what we commonly call “hell.”

Question 16

What Is The Bottomless Pit? (Abyss)

The Bible speaks of a place called the “abyss,” which is sometimes translated as the “bottomless pit.” When used in the New Testament, it can refer to a number of things. This includes the abode of demons, the place of the unbelieving dead, a place where the devil will be bound, the abode of the Antichrist, the dwelling place of Abaddon, who is the angel of the underworld, or the word may simply refer to a very deep place. It all depends upon the context.

The abyss is always located “down” from the earth. The Bible says the following.

It May Refer To The Abode Of Certain Evil Demons

There is a passage in the Gospel of Luke where the abyss seems to refer to the abode of certain demons. Luke tells us that Jesus met a man who was possessed with a number of demons. When Jesus was about to exorcise the demons, these evil spirits spoke up. They did not want to go into the abyss. Scripture says that asked Jesus not to send them there:

And they begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss
(Luke 8:31 NIV).

The abyss seems to be a place where certain demons are confined. It may be the place where a specific group of demons, which are especially evil and violent, are kept locked up. This may explain why these evil spirits begged Jesus not to be sent to that place. They may not have wanted to be confined with this group of ferocious demons.

The Demons In The Abyss Will Be Released

Unfortunately, for the inhabitants of the earth, these confined demons will be released in the future for a five-month period. This is the period known as the “seventieth week of Daniel” or “the Great Tribulation.”

During this period, God will be judging the unbelievers living upon the earth. At that time, these demons will create all types of havoc for the unrighteous. The Book of Revelation explains what they do in this way:

The fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth. The key to the shaft of the abyss was given to him. He opened the shaft of the abyss, and smoke came up out of the shaft like smoke from a great furnace so that the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke from the shaft. Then locusts came out of the smoke on to the earth, and power was given to them like the power that scorpions have on the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green plant, or any tree, but only people who do not have God’s seal on their foreheads. They were not permitted to kill them but were to torment them for five months; their torment is like

the torment caused by a scorpion when it strikes a man (Revelation 9:5 CSB).

While they are called “locusts,” it is a figurative description of a countless swarm of demons, who come out of the abyss and torment the evil people on the earth.

The abyss, therefore, in this instance, may refer to the specific place where the evilest of demons are confined until they are released during this future period. As this passage tells us, the demons torment those who live upon the earth, with a sting like a scorpion.

The Wicked Will Seek Death, But They Will Not Be Allowed To Die

There is something we should note here. The sting from these demons will constantly torment the people but it will not kill them. For a period of time, five months, the people of the earth will be in agony from the sting of them creatures. We then read this description:

In those days people will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them (Revelation 9:6 CSB).

This verse is highly instructive. Because of the torment that comes from the sting of these “locusts,” people will actually seek death but they will not be allowed to die. In other words, they must suffer ongoing punishment from the Lord.

This is similar to the fate of the rich man in Jesus’ story in Luke 16. He was in ongoing torment in Hades, the unseen realm of the dead, but he did not cease to exist. His suffering was continuous.

This is also a stark picture of the fate of the wicked for all eternity. They will be in a place of conscious punishment for their rejection of the Lord, yet they will never be able to go out of existence, to become extinct. The punishment is conscious as well as everlasting. There will be no way out of it.

It Is The Place Of The Dead

As we mentioned, the term “abyss” can have other meanings. Indeed, in the Book of Romans, the word abyss is used to describe the place of the dead:

But the righteousness that comes from faith speaks like this: Do not say in your heart, “Who will go up to heaven?” that is, to bring Christ down or, “Who will go down into the abyss?” that is, to bring Christ up from the dead (Romans 10:6-7 CSB).

The Contemporary English Version translates it this way:

But people whose faith makes them acceptable to God will never ask, “Who will go up to heaven to bring Christ down?” Neither will they ask, “Who will go down into the world of the dead to raise him to life?” (Romans 10:6-7 CEV).

The reference here is to the realm of the dead. In this instance, it has nothing to do with the dwelling place of evil angels. This tells us that the word can have a variety of meanings. It all depends upon the context.

It Is Symbolically Under The Earth

The abyss is symbolically spoken of as an area under the earth. It has a shaft that connects it to the surface. Smoke comes out of the shaft like a furnace. We read of this in the Book of Revelation:

Then the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the abyss. He opened the shaft of the abyss and smoke rose out of it like smoke from a giant furnace. The sun and the air were darkened with smoke from the shaft . . . They have as king over them the angel of the abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon (Revelation 9:1,2,11 NET).

We also discover that there is an angel of the abyss, called Abaddon or Apollyon, who rules over the other demonic creatures. This place is symbolically located somewhere under the surface of the earth.

Why do we say it is symbolic and not literal? In this context, it is talking about spirit beings who dwell in the unseen realm. They do not physically live under the earth or anywhere else in our world.

While find in the Bible that the abyss is always located “down,” in contrast to heaven which is always “up,” this does not mean that we can locate it on a map somewhere underneath the earth.

Furthermore, it is not possible for there to be a literal shaft leading to the “bottomless pit” which goes deep down inside of the earth. Indeed, the earth is about 1,800 miles thick. In other words, it is not bottomless!

It Is Where The Beast Arises

The beast, or the final Antichrist, will arise out of the abyss. We read the following in the Book of Revelation:

Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them (Revelation 11:7 NIV).

He will declare war against the people of God.

The Book of Revelation also says:

The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come (Revelation 17:8 NIV).

The beast arises from this place. This has led to speculation that this final Antichrist will actually be inhabited or possessed by some demonic spirit from the abyss.

It Is Where Satan Is Bound

The abyss is where Satan, the devil, will be bound for a period of one thousand years. The Book of Revelation tells us about his binding in the abyss. We also find that he will be released from the abyss for a short time so that he can deceive the nations for one last time:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven with the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for 1,000 years. He threw him into the abyss, closed it, and put a seal on it so that he would no longer deceive the nations until the 1,000 years were completed. After that, he must be released for a short time (Revelation 20:1-3 CSB).

Again, we emphasize that he will not be bound in some physical place deep within the surface of the earth. He is a spirit creature who operates in the spiritual realm.

We read that Satan is then punished after this rebellion by being sent to his eternal destination, the lake of fire:

When the 1,000 years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle. Their number is like the sand of the sea. They came up over the surface of the earth and surrounded the encampment of the saints, the beloved city. Then fire came down from heaven and consumed them. The Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:7-10 CSB).

This sums up what the Bible says about the bottomless pit, the abyss. As we can observe, it is a temporary place of confinement, not the final destination of angels and evil humans.

Summary To Question 16 What Is The Bottomless Pit? (The Abyss)

The abyss, or bottomless pit, is a place that is symbolically located in the heart of the earth. Its location is always “down.” The abyss is said to be symbolically connected to the earth’s surface by a shaft.

It is used figuratively for the place of the dead as well as the abode of demons. It cannot be a literal pit without a bottom, because the thickness of the earth is limited to about 1,800 miles. In other words, there is a bottom to it.

The abyss seems to be the place of confinement for certain demons which are especially evil and violent. Indeed, when Jesus cast evil spirits out of a man, they begged Him not to send them to the abyss. It must be a place that even demons are frightened of.

In the Book of Revelation we are told that demons, described as “locusts” come up from the abyss and torment the inhabitants of the earth for some five months. While they have a sting like a scorpion, it is not fatal. In fact, the inhabitants of the earth will actually seek to die because of the pain associated with the sting, but they will not be able to die, the Lord will not allow it.

This is consistent with the situation that the rich man who Jesus spoke about in Luke 16. He was in torment in the unseen realm of the dead, but his torment was ongoing. There was no escaping.

It also points to the future destiny of the unrighteous. They will be confined to hell, the lake of fire, for all eternity. While they will be consciously punished, there will be no escape. In all of this we find a consistent biblical picture with respect to the destiny of the unrighteous.

Scripture also says that the abyss is the place from where the beast, the final Antichrist, arises. This could mean that some demon spirit from the abyss enters into him and controls his actions.

The abyss is also where Satan will be bound for one thousand years after Jesus Christ returns. He will be kept there until his final release.

Eventually he will be released from the abyss and lead one more rebellion against the Lord. After the rebellion is crushed, the devil will be sent to the lake of fire.

The abyss, being a temporary place of confinement, will be destroyed at the Final Judgment. All the wicked, whether human or angelic, will then be placed in permanent confinement in the lake of fire for all eternity.

Question 17

What Is The Lake Of Fire?

The Bible speaks of the wrath of God poured out on the wicked. Paul, in addressing unbelievers, wrote the following about God rewarding the righteous as well as judging the unrighteous:

Don't you know that the reason God is good to you is because he wants you to turn to him? But you are stubborn and refuse to turn to God. So you are making things even worse for yourselves on that day when he will show how angry he is and will judge the world with fairness. God will reward each of us for what we have done. He will give eternal life to everyone who has patiently done what is good in the hope of receiving glory, honor, and life that lasts forever. But he will show how angry and furious he can be with every selfish person who rejects the truth and wants to do evil. All who are wicked will be punished with trouble and suffering. It doesn't matter if they are Jews or Gentiles. But all who do right will be rewarded with glory, honor, and peace, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. God doesn't have any favorites (Romans 2:4-11 CEV).

God's wrath is directed toward those who have rejected His truth. He will repay their unbelief with judgment which will lead to punishment. This includes both Jews and Gentiles. This is the consistent message of Scripture.

The Place Of Final Judgment: The Lake Of Fire (The Second Death)

Scripture speaks of a final place of punishment known as the "lake of fire." It is where people experience the "second death." John wrote about this in the Book of Revelation where he said the beast, the final Antichrist, as well as the false prophet, would be sent to this place of everlasting punishment:

But the beast was taken prisoner, and along with him the false prophet, who had performed the signs in his presence. He deceived those who accepted the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image with these signs. Both of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur (Revelation 19:20 CSB).

In chapter twenty of the Book of Revelation, we read further of this place of punishment. We are told the following:

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 . . . Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10,14,15 ESV).

Those whose names are not found in the Book of Life are thrown into the lake of fire. This is the "second death."

In the next chapter of Revelation, it says the following:

But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death (Revelation 21:8 NLT).

This fiery lake is the place of final punishment for the wicked.

There Is The Second Death

As we have noted, the lake of fire is also known as the “second death.” John wrote about this in the Book of Revelation:

Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years (Revelation 20:6 NIV).

The lake of fire is the second death. The first death is physical death while this second death is eternal death, eternal separation from the Lord.

We Can Make The Following Observations About The Lake Of Fire

The punishment of the lake of fire is final, conscious, and bodily. From these passages we can make the following observations.

1. The Second Death Is Eternal Death

The lake of fire is the final destination for all unbelievers. It is the second death, or eternal death, from which there is no hope. The second death is equivalent to saying the “last death.” Those who had been kept in Hades, the temporary place of punishment, will eventually be thrown in this the lake of fire, their ultimate destination.

2. The Suffering Is Conscious

Those suffering in the lake of fire are conscious. Furthermore, their conscious suffering is eternal. In other words, the dead are not in a state of extinction.

3. The Lake Of Fire Is A Burning Lake

The lake of fire is referred to as a burning lake. Four times, fire and sulfur are mentioned in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 14:10; 19:20; 20:10 and 21:8) when referring to the lake of fire.

4. The Wicked Are In Some Type Of Bodily Form

The wicked are suffering in bodily form. There will be a resurrection of the unbelieving dead in some type of bodily form. Jesus emphasized this fact when He said the following:

Don't be surprised! The time will come when all of the dead will hear the voice of the Son of Man, and they will come out of their graves. Everyone who has done good things will rise to life, but everyone who has done evil things will rise and be condemned (John 5:28,29 CEV).

Paul said the following about his hope for the resurrection:

I have the same hope in God that these men have, that he will raise both the righteous and the unrighteous (Acts 24:15 NLT).

If the unrighteous dead were merely annihilated, then there would be no reason for their resurrection. They are raised for the purpose of judgment and then punishment.

Indeed, if they were in their final place of punishment in Hades, there would not be a need for a resurrection. Hades is temporary, while the lake of fire is permanent.

This sums up some of the things which Scripture teaches us about this horrific destination of the wicked, the lake of fire. It truly is a place everyone should want to avoid. However, countless numbers of people will send themselves there because of their rejection of the God of the Bible.

Summary To Question 17 What Is The Lake Of Fire?

The Bible says that God will pour out His wrath upon the wicked. This will include evil angels as well as wicked humanity. They will all go to a place of final punishment. What is commonly known as hell is what the Bible calls the "lake of fire." From the Scripture, we learn a number of things about this place of punishment. The lake of fire is described as a "burning lake." It is characterized by fire.

It is also known as the second death or "eternal death." The first death is physical death while the second death is eternal death, everlasting separation from God and all things good.

We are told that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will be sent there. The Bible also says that all unbelievers go there because of their rejection of the Lord. Sinning angels will also be sent to the lake of fire.

Those in the lake of fire will suffer eternally, there is no escape for them. Furthermore, they will also be conscious during this time.

Scripture says they will also suffer in some type of body, or bodily form, but this body is not described. Indeed, they are raised from the dead for the purpose of judgment and then punishment.

It will be an awful place, but it can be avoided. If a person trusts Jesus Christ as his or her Savior, then heaven awaits them instead of this horrific place of punishment.

Question 18

Who Will Be Sent To The Lake Of Fire?

Eternal life consists of knowing a person, Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus defined eternal life for us when He prayed the following to God the Father on the night of His betrayal:

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17:3 ESV).

Eternal life begins the moment that a person believes in Jesus Christ. Unbelievers will not have that privilege of experiencing eternal life. Though they do not possess “eternal life,” they will exist eternally. Indeed, all of us have been made for eternity.

The final destination of the wicked is termed hell, the “lake of fire.” This is also known in Scripture as “the second death.” The Bible specifically tells us who will populate this lake of fire, hell. It is as follows.

1. Hypocrites

The place of final judgment and then punishment is where God will put the hypocrites. Jesus spoke of the punishment which these people would receive. We read the following in Matthew:

And he will cut the servant to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 24:51 NLT).

A hypocrite is an actor, someone wearing a false face. Many religious people without a genuine relationship to Jesus Christ will end up in hell because they are merely pretending to be a Christian. They are actors, hypocrites.

2. Judas Iscariot

We also find that Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus, has been consigned to the place of final punishment. We read in the Book of Acts what the apostles prayed concerning him:

And they prayed and said, “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place” (Acts 1:24,25 NKJV).

By his own actions, Judas was destined for divine punishment. The disciples said that he went to, “his own place.”

3. The Final Antichrist

While many antichrists have come upon the scene of history, there will be a final one who will appear. This final Antichrist, or false Christ, will have his end in hell, the lake of fire. Paul said that this man of sin will be destroyed when Christ returns:

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming (2 Thessalonians 2:8 NIV).

Note that the final Antichrist will be “destroyed” at the coming of Christ. However, this does not mean that he will cease to exist. Indeed, we discover that he will be sent to the place of final punishment, the lake of fire where he will suffer eternal torment.

4. The False Prophet

The final Antichrist will be joined in the lake of fire with his cohort and promoter, a person known as the second beast or the false prophet. Together they will also be sent to the lake of fire:

Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone (Revelation 19:20 NKJV).

His destination is the same as the final Antichrist. They will go together to this place of punishment which is fitting for them and the evils they committed.

5. Satan, The Devil

Jesus said that the lake of fire has been prepared specifically for the devil and his evil angels. The Scripture says that this will be his final destination. This everlasting punishment for him is recorded for us in the Book of Revelation:

Then the devil, who had deceived them, was thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, joining the beast and the false prophet. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 NLT).

Satan will find himself in this fiery punishment for all eternity.

6. The Fallen Angels

The Bible also says that the evil angels, the ones who originally rebelled against God, will be sent to the “lake of fire.” In fact, Jesus said that hell, the lake of fire, was specifically prepared for them. Matthew records Jesus saying:

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 (Matthew 25:41 ESV).

These rebellious angels are doomed to this place of final punishment. Indeed, it was created especially for them.

7. All Unrepentant Sinners

The lake of fire will also be the final destination of all unrepentant sinners. This includes everyone, before and after Christ, who have not responded to God’s Word. Those who have not trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior will find their way to the lake of fire. John wrote:

Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15 NIV).

This is the destiny of the wicked.

We read in John’s gospel of Jesus telling the religious leaders that they would not be able to go to the place where He was going:

Later Jesus said to them again, “I am going away. You will search for me and die in your sin. You cannot come where I am going.” The Jewish leaders asked, “Is he planning to commit suicide? What does he mean, ‘You cannot come where I am going?’” Then he said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not. That is why I said that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am who I say I am, you will die in your sins” (John 8:21-24 NLT).

Sinners who do not repent, will join these other personages in this place of punishment. There will be no hope for them once they are there.

This sums up the inhabitants of the lake of fire, the everlasting place of punishment for all wicked beings, whether angelic or human.

Summary To Question 18 Who Will Be Sent To The Lake Of Fire?

Hell, the lake of fire, which is also known as the second death, is where unbelievers will be sent for all of eternity. The Bible specifies who will be going to hell, to this lake of fire and sulphur. They are as follows.

Hypocrites will go to the lake of fire. These are people who profess one thing, but believe and act differently.

Judas Iscariot is specifically singled out as one who will be sent to this place. His betrayal of Jesus makes him deserve this punishment.

The final Antichrist, as well as his promoter, the false prophet, will also be sent to the lake of fire. Indeed, they are the first two humans who will be thrown into to this place of everlasting punishment.

Satan, the heavenly being who became the devil, along with all of the other fallen angels, will also be consigned to this place of punishment for all of eternity.

In addition, every human being who has rejected the truth of God will have the lake of fire as their ultimate destination.

These are the different personages who the Scripture says will ultimately end up in this place of everlasting punishment. Everyone who goes there will be receiving exactly what they deserve.

Question 19

How Could A God Of Love Send People To An Eternal Hell?

This used to be one of the major questions which people would ask of Christians. We say “used to be” because so many people today reject the idea of hell, they do not ask the question anymore! They do not believe that hell actually exists. Yet the Bible says it does.

This being the case, the question is usually posed something like this, “If God is such a good and loving God, then how could He send people away to an eternal hell?” Hell seems so inconsistent with the character of a loving God. Why not send everyone to heaven?

God Is Love

The Bible does say that God is love. John wrote the following:

God is love (1 John 4:8 KJV)

So why does this loving God send people to an eternal hell? To answer this question properly, a number of points should be made.

1. Hell Was Not Prepared For Humanity

First, we must recognize that God did not make hell for human beings. The Bible says that hell was specially prepared for the devil and his angels. Jesus said:

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’ (Matthew 25:41 ESV).

Hell was not part of God’s original creation. It was only created after the angelic fall. It was made because of their particular sin. In other words, if there had been no angelic rebellion, there would be no hell, no lake of fire.

However, because a number of the angelic host rebelled against God, hell was created for them. It was not created for the human race. This first point must not be misunderstood! Hell was not made for humans.

2. We Are Made For Eternity

There is something else we must appreciate. Each human being has been made for eternity. The writer of Ecclesiastes made the following points about what God has placed in our hearts:

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end (Ecclesiastes 3:11 NIV).

Eternity has been placed in our hearts. All of us will have to spend eternity somewhere; for God has made humans to exist forever. Indeed, when we consider the totality of Scripture, we find that there is no destruction of the human soul, the spirit. The consistent teaching of the Bible is that everyone who is dead will be raised and then judged. The judgment will send them to one of two destinations, everlasting life with the Lord or everlasting punishment apart from His presence.

3. Humanity Is Now Separated From God By Sin

The reason for the eventual judgment of the human race goes back to the very beginning, we humans have become separated from the living God by our sins.

When God put the first people, Adam and Eve, into the Garden of Eden, He gave them only one negative commandment:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17 ESV).

The Bible says that they disobeyed the Lord, and therefore brought sin into the human race. Sin brings death or separation from God. Consequently, the relationship between God and humanity had been broken in the Garden of Eden. It needed to be restored.

4. Jesus Died So People Do Not Have To Go To Hell

The nature of God demands that our sins must be paid for. The good news is that the price has been paid! The Bible teaches that the punishment for our sins was placed upon Jesus Christ when He died on the cross of Calvary. He experienced death for each of us. The writer to the Hebrews said:

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 (Hebrews 2:9 ESV).

Jesus suffered the punishment and separation from God which you and I so richly deserve. He willingly took our punishment upon Himself.

This punishment for our sins has been paid in full. Nothing else is owed. Indeed, Jesus' dying words on the cross are recorded by John:

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30 NIV).

Salvation for the human race has now been accomplished. It has been completed, finished. This means that nobody has to go to hell, this horrific

place of eternal separation from God. Jesus Christ has died in our place so that we can be with Him forever in the heavenly realm.

5. There Is Nowhere Else For Unbelievers To Go

However, not everyone has accepted God's free gift of salvation through the Person of God the Son, Jesus Christ. For whatever reason, they have rejected Christ's offer of forgiveness of sin. They are in a state of unbelief in Jesus.

Since all of us have been made for eternity, those who have rejected Jesus must go somewhere. In other words, they cannot merely cease to exist. Consequently, they will go to hell.

Hell, by definition, is the total absence of the loving presence of God. When God's offer of forgiveness is refused, then unbelievers must go to a place that is apart from His goodness. Heaven and hell are the only two choices which human beings have.

6. God Sends No One To Everlasting Punishment

It cannot be stressed too strongly that God sends no one to hell, the place of everlasting punishment. People go to hell because of their willful rejection of Jesus Christ. They do not go to hell because of God's desire to send them there!

In fact, the Bible says that God wants all people to believe in Him. Paul wrote to the following to Timothy about what God wants for all humanity:

Who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4 ESV).

Yet He has given each of us a choice. Those who go to hell have willingly rejected Christ and His message. They will have to pay the penalty for their own sins because they have chosen this course. It is not because God has chosen it for them. Indeed, Peter wrote:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9 NIV).

The Lord is patient with humanity because He is giving us a chance to repent. This is why His judgment is not always immediate.

Conclusion: God Sends Nobody To Hell

It is the consistent teaching of the Bible that God sends nobody to hell. Instead, people send themselves to this place of punishment by their rejection of Jesus. God wants people to turn to Him. Indeed, He gives them every opportunity. Yet, in the end the choice is ours.

Therefore, while hell, or eternal punishment, is in fact a reality for those who reject Jesus, it is not necessary that anyone go there. Jesus Christ has made a way of escape from hell.

Summary To Question 19

How Could A God Of Love Send People To An Eternal Hell?

If people grant the idea that an eternal hell exists, then they want to know why a God of love would send people there. Hell seems so contradictory with the idea of a loving God.

Yet, while the Bible does teach that God is love, the doctrine of hell is certainly consistent with His character. A number of things should be noted.

To begin with, hell was not created for the human race. Jesus said that it was made for the devil and his angels at the time they rebelled against Him. No human being was ever supposed to go there. It was not created for the humanity.

However, humanity rebelled also against God in the beginning and therefore became separated from Him. This separation will exist beyond the grave. This is what the Bible terms as the “second death.” That’s the bad news.

The good news is this separation does not have to exist in this life or beyond the grave. Jesus Christ died so that humanity can have their relationship with the Living God restored. Trusting in Christ as Savior begins an eternal relationship.

However, each of us has a choice to make. If someone rejects God’s free gift of salvation, then they must be banished from His presence. Since we are beings that have been made for eternity, we must go somewhere after this life is over. That somewhere is hell for those who turn their back on His offer of forgiveness of sin.

Consequently, though God originally created hell for the devil and his angels, wicked humanity will send themselves there for not believing God’s promises, as well has His warnings.

So the answer to the question is simple: God does not send anyone to hell, people send themselves to the lake of fire by rejecting Jesus Christ. Hell is a self-chosen destiny.

Question 20

Why Should People Have To Suffer Eternally?

This, in many ways, is *the* most difficult question for Christians. Probably the hardest thing for people to comprehend is what the Bible has to say about the destiny of the wicked; they will be judged and then punished eternally for rejecting Christ.

The concept of punishment is not hard to understand. Most people can appreciate the idea that people are responsible for their own misdeeds and therefore should suffer some type of punishment.

What is difficult for people to understand is the length of punishment, it is everlasting. Why should there be no end to someone's suffering? How could a God of love allow this? There are three important points that need to be made in answering this question.

1. We Are Made For Eternity

We stress the fact that humans have been made to exist eternally. The Bible says that each soul, or spirit, will exist somewhere forever. There is no such thing as the extinction of the soul. Once a human being comes into existence, they cannot ever cease to exist.

Death, in the Bible, is always separation, never extinction. Indeed, there is nothing in Scripture which would give any indication that humans will ever cease to exist after they have died. This is the first point which we must understand.

2. We Have Sinned Against A Holy God: Sin Must Be Dealt With

Part of the problem is not recognizing the awfulness of sin. Humanity has sinned against a holy God. Because God is holy, sin requires punishment. This is the area that most humans do not appreciate. They do not begin to comprehend the awfulness of sin and the holiness of God. Our sins have offended a holy God and must be paid for. Either we will let Christ pay for them, or we will pay for them ourselves. One way or another, our sins have to be paid for.

We find that a conflict existed. God had to punish sin, yet somehow make a way where sinners could be justified, or declared righteous, without themselves being punished. This was accomplished by Jesus' death on the cross. The Bible says that Jesus became a sin-offering on our behalf:

For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21 NLT).

The death of Jesus Christ has solved the problem. Sin had been paid for by Jesus. Sinners could now be made right with God by trusting in what Jesus has done for them. We do not have to suffer for our own sins. He has died so that we do not have to die. Indeed, Jesus experienced death on our behalf.

The Bible further says that Jesus satisfied all the requirements of God. He paid the price of sin in full. John records what happened at Jesus' last moments:

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30 ESV).

God has made a way for sinners to become righteous in His sight. He can now accept us in His presence. Our only responsibility is to believe this truth.

However, if someone rejects what Jesus has done for them, then they have doomed themselves to hell; to suffer needlessly for their own sins. Thus, we decide our own fate, our own eternal future.

3. There Are Degrees Of Suffering In Hell

While every unbeliever will suffer in hell, the suffering will not all be the same. Scripture teaches that there will be levels of suffering. Not everyone will be punished to the same degree. People will be punished based upon the amount of truth which they have received and rejected.

When we examine what the Scripture says about judgment of the wicked and then their eventual punishment, we find three distinct truths. First, everything that a person does will be subject to judgment. Second, the works of unbelievers will be weighed. Finally, there will be degrees of punishment based upon the works people have done. The evidence is as follows.

Everything Unbelievers Say Or Do Will Be Judged

Paul said that God would judge everyone's secret life. Nobody will escape. He wrote the following to the Romans:

On that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (Romans 2:16 ESV).

Even our secret thoughts will be judged. In addition, everything will come to light on the Day of Judgment. Jesus said:

Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops (Luke 12:2,3 ESV)

There will be no “perfect crime.” Everything will be known.

Jesus also said that every word we speak would be taken into account:

And I tell you this, that you must give an account on judgment day of every idle word you speak (Matthew 12:36 NLT).

Nothing will be hidden from the Lord. Nothing.

The Sins Of Believers Have Been Forgiven

Such is the fate of the wicked. The good news for believers is that Jesus Christ has died for those sins! Our sins will not be called into account on the Day of Judgment because Christ has already taken the punishment for us. Our sins have been forgiven and forgotten.

The Unbeliever's Will Have Their Works Judged

John said the unbelieving, or unrighteous, dead would be judged based upon their works. We read of this in the Book of Revelation:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done (Revelation 20:12,13 NIV).

The works of those who do not believe in Jesus will be the basis for their punishment. All of them will have come short of God's perfect standard. None of us, no matter how good, can reach heaven on our own. The Bible makes this point very clear:

All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23 CEV).

None of us can make it to heaven by our own good works.

Some Receive Harsher Punishment Than Others

There will be degrees of punishment in the afterlife. Indeed, Jesus said to a number of cities that they would be punished harsher than the ancient evil cities of Tyre and Sidon, Sodom and Gomorrah.

Matthew records His words as follows:

Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for

you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you (Matthew 11:20-24 NIV).

The punishment will be easier for Tyre and Sidon and Sodom and Gomorrah than it will be for the cities which saw the miracles of Jesus. These unbelievers who witnessed the miracles of Christ will be brought down to Hades, the temporary waiting place of the unrighteous dead.

Eventually, at the final judgment, these unbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire. When that happens, they will be judged more harshly than the inhabitants of the evil cities of the past. In other words, their punishment will be more severe.

We find that Jesus taught degrees of punishment elsewhere:

And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare *himself* or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47:48 NKJV).

All unbelievers will be condemned, but they will receive different degrees of punishment. It will be based upon the degree of their sin.

Degrees Of Punishment Does Not Mean Some Will Eventually Be Saved

There are degrees of punishment for the unbeliever based upon their works. This does not mean that some of them will eventually have enough good works to earn their salvation. It only means that the punishment will be less severe than others receive.

No amount of human works or human suffering can earn salvation. Salvation is only attained through belief in Jesus Christ and the only chance to believe is here in this life. After death, comes only judgment and then punishment.

Summary To Question 20 Why Should People Have To Suffer Eternally?

One of the major problems people have with the idea of hell is its duration. While some punishment can be justified for people sinning against God and His laws, many people cannot understand why the punishment has to be eternal. Why do people have to suffer forever?

Simply put, since humans have been made to exist forever, their suffering away from the presence of God must also be forever. Human beings cannot merely cease to exist. The people who have rejected Jesus Christ as

their Savior must have some place to go, and hell is that place of total separation from God's presence.

However, nobody needs to suffer in hell. The Bible says that Jesus Christ has solved the problem of punishing sin without punishing the sinner. Christ took the penalty of sin upon Himself when He died upon the cross of Calvary. The Bible says that the Lord has suffered in the place of each of us, tasting death for everyone.

On the cross, Jesus testified that salvation was now complete. His mission was finished. Humans can now be forgiven for their sins because the requirement of a holy God has been met. God can accept us because of Jesus Christ.

Our responsibility is to believe this truth. Yet if we reject what Christ has done for us, we must suffer the consequences. We must go to a place which is apart from His holy presence. This place is hell.

Though all who have rejected Christ will be eternally punished for their sins, not all will be punished to the same degree. Scripture teaches that every thought, word, or deed will be subject to judgment and then punishment. The unbelievers will have their works judged. The amount of punishment they receive will be based upon their response to the truth which they have received.

The fact that there are degrees of punishment does not mean that some unbelievers will eventually suffer enough to earn salvation. Salvation is a free gift from God. It is based upon what Jesus Christ has done on Calvary's cross on behalf of humanity. Yet, their only chance to believe is in this life. Scripture emphasizes that the day of salvation is now!

Question 21

What Are The Arguments For Hell Fire Being Literal?

The Bible speaks of hell fire. In the Book of Revelation, we are told that the devil and the false prophet are thrown into a lake of fire:

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 (Revelation 20:10 ESV).

Are we to understand the fire as being literal, or is it merely symbolic? Many think that the fires of hell are literal. They argue as follows.

1. Fire Speaks Of God's Wrath

In Scripture, fire is often used as an instrument to demonstrate the wrath of God. In fact, Moses compared God to a devouring fire:

For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God (Deuteronomy 4:24 ESV).

God is not a fire; He is like a fire.

The prophet Nahum spoke of the fierce anger of the Lord. He said the wrath of God is poured out like fire on His enemies:

Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him (Nahum 1:6 NIV).

God's fiery wrath can be fierce.

Jeremiah wrote about the fire of God's wrath on those who were evil. He said the fire would not be able to be quenched:

Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done--burn with no one to quench it (Jeremiah 4:4 NIV).

Fire speaks of God's wrath. Consequently the idea that God would punish unbelievers with eternal fire is consistent with what we know about His character.

The prophet Malachi proclaimed that the fire of the Lord can also serve as a purifying source. Those who believe in Him will be purified by the fire:

On the day the Lord comes, he will be like a furnace that purifies silver or like strong soap in a washbasin. No one will be able to stand up to him. The LORD will purify the descendants of Levi, as though they

were gold or silver. Then they will bring the proper offerings to the LORD (Malachi 3:2,3 CEV).

Fire, therefore, purifies the believer, but punishes the unbeliever.

2. False Idols Were To Be Burned With Fire

In addition, the people were told to burn the false idols with fire. Moses wrote the following to the people of Israel:

The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 7:25 NIV).

This is another indication that actual fire is used in God's punishment of sin. These worthless idols were to be destroyed.

3. In The Past God Has Used Fire To Judge Humans

Finally, the Bible says that God has already destroyed evil people by means of fire. We read about this in the Book of Numbers where the Lord used the fire to destroy Korah and those who rebelled with him:

The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them along with Korah, whose followers died when the fire devoured the 250 men. And they served as a warning sign (Numbers 26:10 NIV).

If the Lord has judged people with literal fire in the past, then He will also do it in the future. Therefore, it is consistent to see the fires of final judgment as literal fire.

The Rich Man Was Suffering In The Fire In Jesus' Story

One other thing may be added. In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, we find that the rich man was experiencing a fiery judgment in the afterlife:

He yelled, 'Father Abraham! Have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool off my tongue. I am suffering in this fire (Luke 16:24 God's Word).

This man was suffering in some type of fire. This seems to confirm that the fire is literal. It would also seem to follow that the fire in hell will also be literal. In sum, the idea with the fires of hell being literal is certainly consistent with the teaching of Scripture.

Summary To Question 21

What Are The Arguments For Understanding Hell Fire To Be Literal? (Literal View Of Hell)

Many people take the Bible at face value when it says there are literal fires in hell. In other words, what we have are fires of judgment burning for all

eternity. The argument for literal fires in the punishment of hell can be summarized in the following manner.

For one thing, the Bible often describes the lost as going into eternal fire. Unless there are good reasons for assuming the words mean something else, we should take them literally. The fires of hell are real.

Fire has been a tool of God's judgment in the past. Indeed, we are told when a man named Korah rebelled against Moses, he and his rebels were destroyed by fire.

Jeremiah the prophet wrote of the unquenchable fire that would come upon the wicked, as did the prophet Nahum.

We are also told that the Lord ordered pagan idols to be burned by fire.

Since literal fire has been used in the past to destroy idols and rebellious human beings, it may also be used in eternity to punish those who have rejected the Lord. It would be consistent with the way God's punishment is often described. It is like a fire.

Therefore, since God has used fire to punish unbelief in the past, it is not inconsistent with what He may use for all eternity.

In addition, in Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man who had died was suffering a fiery punishment in the afterlife.

Therefore, literal fire is consistent with what we know about God, as well as how He has judged sin in the past, and seemingly, how He will punish the unrighteous in the future.

Question 22

What Are The Arguments Against Hell Fire Being Literal? (The Metaphorical View Of Hell)

Many people believe the fires of hell, the place of final punishment, are literal. However, not every Bible-believer agrees with this.

Indeed, there are two main problems with understanding the fires of hell to be literal. They are whom hell was prepared for, as well as the idea of fire in the midst of darkness. We can list these problems as follows.

Problem 1: Hell Was Prepared For Spirit-Creatures

The Bible says that hell was prepared for the devil and his angels. The wicked will hear the following words from God:

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’ (Matthew 25:41 ESV).

The devil and his accursed angels are spirit-beings, creatures without bodies. How can something like fire have any effect on them? You cannot burn something that has no material existence. The fire, therefore, is seemingly symbolic of something else. Literal fire would have no effect on these beings.

Problem 2: How Can There Be Fires In Darkness?

The second problem with understanding the fires in a literal manner is that hell is spoken of as a place of outer, or complete, darkness. How can you have darkness when there is fire? It seems that either the fire, or the darkness, or perhaps both of them, are not to be understood literally.

These two points show that the fires of the final judgment are not necessarily understood to be literal. However, literal fires or not, it is a place of horrible suffering.

Problem 3: The Rich Man And Lazarus Are Described With Body Parts

There is something else to consider. In Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus, each is described as having “body parts” in the in-between state. The rich man was in agony in the flames. He describes himself as having a tongue. He also describes Lazarus as having a finger:

So he [the rich man] called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in anguish in this fire (Luke 16:24 NET).

This scene takes place in the in-between state, the time between death and resurrection. Most likely, the dead are in a disembodied state. It is therefore difficult to understand how someone without a physical form could have a literal tongue, have a literal finger, or be tormented by literal, physical fire.

Problem 4: Undying Worms And Chains Of Darkness In The Unseen Realm

There are other physical images which used to describe conditions in the realm of the dead. Jesus spoke of undying worms, or maggots, in hell:

Where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched (Mark 9:48 NET)

Jude wrote about chains of darkness that presently confine the wicked angels:

You also know that the angels who did not keep within their proper domain but abandoned their own place of residence, he has kept in eternal chains in utter darkness, locked up for the judgment of the great Day (Jude 6 NET).

Again, these images are a symbolic way of picturing the unrighteous in the afterlife.

Other Problems With The Literal View

There are other problems with arguing for a literal fire in hell. The description of the people being judged includes the gnashing or grinding of teeth. Does this mean they will have actual teeth? If so, what about those people who never had any teeth or who have lost their teeth? Will they have to grow teeth to go to hell? This was never seemingly meant to be taken literally for everyone.

The Analogy Of Heaven

One of the reasons why some people believe the fires of hell are not literal is a comparison to what Scripture says about heaven. They believe that since the descriptions of heaven are not meant to be taken literally, then neither are the various descriptions of the sufferings in hell.

For example, it is contended that the descriptions of heaven in Scripture are the best way of describing the indescribable to someone living in the first century A.D. Therefore, we should not press the details too far.

In the same manner, the descriptions of hell are the best way of explaining what awaits unbelievers. However, neither of these descriptions of the final destination for the saved and the lost are to be understood literally.

Indeed, heaven is described as a large walled city. In the first century walled cities illustrated protection. Therefore, a city with high walls gave the readers the idea that heaven will be a place where believers are protected.

In addition, the Book of Revelation says that each of the twelve gates of the Holy City is made out of a single pearl. Pearls were everywhere at that time so the people understood the analogy.

Yet Scripture does not speak of any diamonds in the precious stones of heaven. Why not? Diamonds are certainly more valuable than pearls. However, it is contended that diamonds were unknown at that time of the writing of the Book of Revelation. This, it is argued, is a further reason not to take the descriptions literally.

These Non-Literal Description Do Not Portray An Easier Hell

There is the objection, often made, that invoking the idea of figurative, or non-literal language, may be an attempt to evade the true horrors of hell. However, the opposite is actually true. Indeed, the horrific nature of hell is so great that earthly language cannot do complete justice to what awaits the unbeliever.

By Scripture using these figures of unquenchable fire, undying maggots, and everlasting chains of darkness, it paints a picture beyond what any earthly description could give.

Consequently, the metaphorical view does not really take the “hell” out of hell.

Summary To Question 22

What Are The Arguments Against Understanding Hell Fire As Literal? (Metaphorical View Of Hell)

Scripture speaks of the “fires of hell.” However, there is a question as to whether or not this is to be understood literally. While many people think it refers to an actual fire, there are a number of reasons as to why others do not believe the punishment of hell should be understood in a literal manner. Instead, they understand the descriptions to be metaphorical.

For one thing, hell was originally prepared for the devil and his angels. They are spirit-beings. They have no material substance, no bodily or corporeal form. It is difficult to see how literal fire would have any effect on them.

In addition, hell is spoken of as a place of total darkness. It is hard to reconcile darkness with fire. These two facts seem incompatible with a literal fire.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we find the rich man, in the realm of the dead, describing fiery pain. He also wants Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool his tongue. Since the dead are most likely in a disembodied state, he would not have a literal tongue nor would Lazarus have a literal finger.

We could add to this the description in Jude of evil angels who are confined in “everlasting chains,” as well as Jesus speaking of the undying maggots in hell. These are physical images describing a non-physical reality.

Furthermore, there is the comparison with heaven. Heaven is described as a large city with high walls. The twelve gates are each made of one single pearl. This description would certainly resonate with a first-century person. They would understand heaven to be a place of safety and security with large gates and high thick walls. This may indicate the description should not be understood literally.

If this is the case with heaven, then it is contended that it should be the same with hell. While there is a terrible punishment awaiting those who reject God's truth, we should not necessarily understand the biblical description to be an actual representation of what unbelievers should literally expect.

Whether or not the fires in hell are literal, those Bible-believers who hold the metaphorical view of hell recognize that Scripture does speak of an actual hell, and this hell is a terrible place of suffering. Indeed, the various images of an unquenchable fire, undying maggots, and everlasting chains of darkness, point to a horrific reality.

Consequently, one needs to do whatever it takes to avoid this terrible place. This means a person must believe in Jesus Christ to avoid the real sufferings of hell, no matter how literal or non-literal they may be.

Question 23

Will There Be Degrees Of Punishment In Hell Or Will Everyone Be Punished The Same?

Will everyone receive the same judgment in hell, or will there be different degrees of punishment depending upon the sin? What does the Bible say? As we noted earlier, as we went through the teaching of the New Testament, there will indeed be degrees of punishment meted out upon the unrighteous in the next world. A number of observations need to be made.

1. Judgment Is Based Upon Knowledge

To begin with, there is a principle found throughout the entire Bible that teaches that judgment, and then punishment, is based upon the amount of knowledge that the person has.

The writings of Paul emphasized that punishment was based upon knowledge. Indeed, the more knowledge the harsher the punishment. He wrote the following to the Romans:

God will punish the Gentiles when they sin, even though they never had God's written law. And he will punish the Jews when they sin, for they do have the law. For it is not merely knowing the law that brings God's approval. Those who obey the law will be declared right in God's sight. Even when Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, instinctively follow what the law says, they show that in their hearts they know right from wrong. They demonstrate that God's law is written within them, for their own consciences either accuse them or tell them they are doing what is right. The day will surely come when God, by Jesus Christ, will judge everyone's secret life. This is my message (Romans 2:12-16 NLT).

Those who had received greater knowledge of God were held more responsible than those with less knowledge.

Hence, they would be punished more harshly than those who had lesser knowledge.

Jesus Taught That Judgment Will Be Based Upon What We Know

Jesus also taught that God judges people based upon the knowledge that each of us have. Luke records Him saying the following:

The servant who knew what his master wanted but didn't get ready to do it will receive a hard beating. But the servant who didn't know what his master wanted and did things for which he deserved punishment will receive a light beating. A lot will be expected from everyone who has been given a lot. More will be demanded from everyone who has been entrusted with a lot (Luke 12:47:48 God's Word).

We note the different degrees of punishment that the unrighteous will receive. The ones who know certain things will receive a harsher beating than the ones who do not know.

In sum, God's judgment will be based upon what the person knows. The more they know, the more will be expected of them.

James Illustrates This Principle Of Judgment

The same principle of judgment is found in the Book of James. He wrote about those desiring to teach the Word of God. He said that they would be held to a stricter standard:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1 ESV).

Though this is referring to a different type of judgment, not one of condemnation, the principle is still the same. God judges based upon the knowledge the person has received.

2. There Is Greater Punishment For Those Who Know More

Because those that know more will be held to a higher standard, their punishment will be greater. The Bible illustrates this as follows.

Israel Will Be Punished To A Greater Extent Than The Gentiles

According to the Old Testament, those who belonged to the covenant people Israel were judged on a much stricter basis than those who did not belong to this believing community. God said the following to them:

Then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over (Leviticus 26:28 NIV).

Israel was judged on a much stricter basis than the Gentile nations. Indeed, the Lord said that they would be punished seven times over.

In the Book of Amos, we read that God said to His people that their punishment would be greater because of the knowledge given to them:

You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities (Amos 3:2 ESV)

Because they were not ignorant of what the Lord wanted from them, they were held responsible for their lack of response to His commands.

The Cities Of Jesus' Day Will Receive Greater Punishment

Punishment will be based upon how much or how little someone knows. Jesus illustrated this truth to the people of His day:

When Jesus sent out His disciples to preach to all the cities of Israel, He gave this warning to certain cities that would not listen to them:

If any household or town refuses to welcome you or listen to your message, shake its dust from your feet as you leave. I tell you the truth, the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah will be better off than such a town on the judgment day (Matthew 10:14,15 NLT).

Here we have the Lord teaching that judgment will be more bearable for Sodom than for these particular cities.

Later, Matthew records that the cities of Korazin and Bethsaida would be punished more strictly than the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon:

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities where he had done most of his miracles, because they hadn't turned from their sins and turned to God. "What horrors await you, Korazin and Bethsaida! For if the miracles I did in you had been done in wicked Tyre and Sidon, their people would have sat in deep repentance long ago, clothed in sackcloth and throwing ashes on their heads to show their remorse. I assure you, Tyre and Sidon will be better off on the judgment day than you!" (Matthew 11:20-22 NLT).

Those particular cities that saw Jesus' miracles, yet still rejected Him, would receive greater punishment than the wicked cities of Tyre and Sidon, who did not witness similar miraculous signs.

Sodom Would Receive Less Punishment

Jesus went on to say the same sort of thing about the city of Capernaum, the city where Jesus made His headquarters. He compared it to the evil city of Sodom:

And you people of Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to the place of the dead. For if the miracles I did for you had been done in Sodom, it would still be here today. I assure you, Sodom will be better off on the judgment day than you (Matthew 11:23,24 NLT).

Sodom will get off easier than Capernaum in the day of judgment.

The People Of Nineveh And The Queen Of Sheba Would Condemn Those Who Rejected Jesus

On another occasion, Jesus compared those who rejected Him to the ancient city of Nineveh. The people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. He also compared His contemporaries to the response of the queen of the South, the Queen of Sheba, who came to hear the wisdom of Solomon:

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and

behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here (Matthew 12:41,42 ESV).

The people of Nineveh were Gentiles, non-Jews, as was the Queen of Sheba. They responded to the truth of God while those who lived in Jesus' day, and saw His miraculous works, did not respond in belief.

These Gentiles will spend eternity in the presence of the Lord while the Jews of Jesus' day, who did not believe, will be sent away to the lake of fire. Furthermore, they will receive the severest of punishment because the Lord Himself was in their midst.

There Is Greater And Lesser Guilt That People Have

The Bible also emphasizes that there can be greater or lesser guilt. Jesus told Pilate that his guilt was less than those who delivered him:

Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin" (John 19:11 ESV).

There are degrees of guilt that people acquire for themselves. Therefore, there will be greater and lesser degrees of punishment.

There Is Greater Punishment For Those Who Rejected Jesus

The writer to the Hebrews says there will be greater punishment for those who rejected Jesus than those who rejected Moses. He explained it this way:

Anyone who refused to obey the law of Moses was put to death without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Think how much more terrible the punishment will be for those who have trampled on the Son of God and have treated the blood of the covenant as if it were common and unholy. Such people have insulted and enraged the Holy Spirit who brings God's mercy to his people (Hebrews 10:28,29 NLT).

The punishment for rejecting Jesus will be much greater than the sin of rejecting the truth that Moses brought. Indeed, Jesus is the One who Moses wrote about, the predicted Messiah.

3. God Will Be Fair In His Judgment

Since God is fair, He will take into account the amount of light, or knowledge, that a person has received. Those with more advantages will be given greater punishment. Jesus prayed for God to forgive those who crucified Him in ignorance:

And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34 ESV).

The Lord recognizes that people sin out of ignorance.

Peter also acknowledged the ignorance of the people. In the Book of Acts, the following words of his speech to the Jews are recorded:

And now, brothers, I know that you did it in ignorance, just as your leaders also did (Acts 3:17 CSB).

They crucified Jesus in their ignorance:

Paul himself admitted that He persecuted the followers of Jesus in ignorance. When he wrote the following to Timothy about His previous life, he described himself as follows:

One who was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an arrogant man. Since it was out of ignorance that I had acted in unbelief, I received mercy (1 Timothy 1:13 CSB).

Paul actually thought that he was doing the work of God when he persecuted the Christians. In other words, he acted out of ignorance.

In Athens, Paul spoke the following words the crowd at Mars Hill:

God overlooked the times when people didn't know any better. But now he commands everyone everywhere to turn to him and change the way they think and act. He has set a day when he is going to judge the world with justice, and he will use a man he has appointed to do this. God has given proof to everyone that he will do this by bringing that man back to life (Acts 17:30,31 God's Word).

Paul emphasized that those people who lived in the past did not know any better. However, the situation was different for those who were hearing him. Ignorant or not, God will judge each one fairly, or with justice, through the man He has appointed to judge the world, Jesus Christ.

In sum, the God of the Bible is fair. Those who are ignorant will not be punished as severely as those who were not.

4. Ignorance Is Not An Excuse

While the Lord understands that some people sin in ignorance, ignorance is not an excuse. People are still guilty for their actions but their knowledge, or lack of it, will be taken into consideration when God judges unbelievers.

All in all, we find that Scripture does indeed teach the idea of degrees of punishment in hell. While everyone in hell will be punished, not all of them will be punished to the same degree.

Summary To Question 23
Will There Be Degrees Of Punishment In Hell
Or Will Everyone Be Punished The Same?

Everyone who goes to hell will be punished for their unbelief, however, not everyone will receive the exact same punishment. Indeed, the Bible speaks of degrees of punishment the lost will receive in the next world. This is consistent with a biblical principle: the greater the knowledge that one has, the greater the responsibility. Scripture gives a number of examples of this.

The nation of Israel was punished to a greater degree than the nations around them because of the special relationship they had with the Lord. Since they had this unique calling, their disobedience meant stricter judgment and therefore, greater punishment.

When Jesus sent out His disciples to preach to the cities of Israel, He told them that those who rejected their teaching would be judged harsher than the city of Sodom on judgment day.

In the same way, the Lord Jesus spoke of different levels of punishment of certain specific cities that personally rejected Him. The cities which saw His mighty works, Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum, would be punished more harshly on the Day of Judgment than the evil cities of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom and Gomorrah. Their accountability would be greater.

He also said that the evil people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of a much lesser figure, Jonah. However, those in His day did not repent at the teaching of the Messiah, One greater than Jonah.

Jesus also illustrated how the Queen of Sheba traveled long distances to hear the wisdom of Solomon while the people in Jesus' day had One greater than Solomon in their midst. Consequently, they would be judged by a more stricter standard.

The Bible also realizes that there are sins which are committed in ignorance. However, ignorance is no excuse. Sin must be judged. Nevertheless, things done in ignorance can lessen the punishment as compared to those things done with full knowledge.

Question 24

Is God Present In Hell?

If God is omnipresent, He exists everywhere at once, does this mean that He is present in hell? If so, then how can the wicked be sent away from God's presence if He is present everywhere, including hell? What does the Bible say to this?

1. God Is Everywhere Present

One of the attributes of God is that He is everywhere present. The psalmist wrote that wherever anyone goes, God will be there with them:

I can never escape from your spirit! I can never get away from your presence! If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the place of the dead, you are there. If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me. I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night--but even in darkness I cannot hide from you. To you the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are both alike to you (Psalm 139:7-12 NLT).

The idea that God is everywhere present is a biblical doctrine. No one can escape His presence, and nothing escapes His notice.

2. People Attempted To Flee From His Wrath

In the Book of Revelation, we read of people attempting to flee from the wrath of God. It says the following:

And they said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Revelation 6:16 CSB).

Of course, they cannot succeed in running away from God's presence. It is not possible to flee from the wrath of God.

3. His Is Present In Hell In His Wrath

How then can God be present in hell, a place where Scripture says is separate from God? Isn't this a contradiction?

No it is not. God will be present in hell in the sense of His wrath. Hell is the place where God's wrath is expressed toward unbelievers. He is there in the sense to punish the wicked, but He is not there in the sense to bless them. The Bible says:

And a third angel followed them and spoke with a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will also drink the wine of God's wrath,

which is mixed full strength in the cup of His anger. He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the sight of the holy angels and in the sight of the Lamb” (Revelation 14:9–10 CSB).

The unbelievers will suffer the wrath of God in the presence of the Lamb, God the Son.

In hell, God’s presence is seen in His punishment. The fires of hell represent God’s righteous punishment for the sins of the wicked. The wicked are separated from God’s love and His blessings but they are certainly not separated from His wrath. It is in this sense, the sense of His wrath, that God is present in hell.

Summary To Question 24 Is God Present In Hell?

The Bible says that God is everywhere present, or omni-present. How then can He banish people from His presence if He is everywhere? This seems inconsistent and contradictory.

A proper understanding of God’s nature can answer this question. God’s presence is everywhere in the universe but His presence in hell is unique. How can this be so?

We find that God will be present in hell in the sense of His wrath, His holy anger. There is no love in hell, only punishment.

In fact, we are specifically told that those people who take the “mark of the beast” will be tormented in the presence of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus. Therefore, God’s presence is in hell in the sense of His wrath.

Consequently, it is in this sense, His Holy wrath, that God will be present in hell. However, His loving presence is not in hell, and it never will be.

Part 2

Is There Really An Eternal Hell?

*Arguments And Responses To
The Idea Of Eternal Suffering*

Historically, Bible-believers have held to the doctrine that the unsaved will suffer endless punishment in an eternal hell. While there have been those in the history of the church who have not embraced this view, the objectors have always been in the minority.

Today there are an increasing number of Bible-believers who, for various reasons, reject the historical view. They do not believe that God has planned an eternal conscious suffering for the unrighteous.

Though these people reject the idea of everlasting punishment for the wicked, there is no single response which they have as to the fate of the unbelievers.

Some believe that the wicked will be annihilated, while others believe the wicked will eventually enter heaven. Whatever the response may be, they do not believe in everlasting conscious punishment for unbelievers.

These are matters of the utmost importance. We need to understand exactly what God has revealed on the subject of the future punishment for the wicked.

Consequently, this section will study the issue in-depth. As always, we will attempt to present the very best arguments which all sides put forward. For those who wish to understand the various issues involved, a thorough study of this topic is crucial.

We have already stated our position in the first section of this book. We believe that the historical view best fits the biblical evidence. In this section, we will look at the alternatives which people have proposed and provide, what we think, are sufficient answers to their objections to the historical doctrine.

Question 25

How Should We Approach The Question Of The Ultimate Fate Of The Wicked?

There are a number of things which all Bible-believers accept as true. For example, those who trust in the God of Scripture, through His Son Jesus Christ, will spend forever with Him in heaven. On this subject, we are all in accord. No Bible-believer denies that the Lord has promised that those who believe in Christ will spend eternity with Him. This is clear.

Not Everyone Agrees On The Fate Of The Wicked

However, there is not complete agreement among Christians when it comes to the destiny of unbelievers. What will happen to those who lived in the Old Testament times and rejected the God of the Old Testament? Likewise, what will be the destiny of the people who have lived during the New Testament period and afterward and have rejected Jesus Christ and His offer of forgiveness of sin? What will be the result for their unbelief?

The Historical View: An Eternal Hell

Historically, it has been believed and taught by Christians that the wicked would be eternally separated from the loving presence of God. They would be sent to a place known as hell, the lake of fire. In hell, they would be consciously punished for their unbelief. This conscious punishment would be everlasting. In other words, there will be no end to it.

While unbelievers reject this doctrine of hell, Christians have embraced it. This is not because of some personal desire for eternal vengeance on the wicked, but rather because they believe that this is what Scripture clearly teaches about the fate of the lost. Nobody likes to think this is what will happen to the wicked, and we certainly do not wish hell upon anyone.

However, what *we* desire is not the issue. The issue is plain and simple. Does the Bible, the Word of the living God, have anything definite to say upon the subject? If it does not, then we must say that this is one of those areas which God has not given us sufficient information to know the truth. Consequently, we cannot come to any firm conclusion. On the other hand, if Scripture does provide us with some specifics on this matter, it is our responsibility to follow what it says.

Throughout the history of the church, the great majority of Bible-believers have been convinced that the Scripture does provide specific truth on this subject, and this truth is that the wicked are eternally punished while in a conscious state.

The Doctrine Of Eternal Suffering Is Now Questioned By Some Christians

Yet in recent years, there have been a growing number of Bible-believers who are questioning the historical view of an eternal hell as the final

destination for unbelievers. For a number of reasons, some biblical, some moral, some emotional, and some philosophical, the idea that hell consists of everlasting conscious punishment is rejected. A number of different solutions have been offered in the place of the historical understanding.

Since some of the people questioning the historical understanding of hell are Bible-believing Christians who, among other things, use the Bible to support their position, it is important that we take their objections seriously. Therefore, we must take an in-depth look at the subject of the fate of the wicked from the totality of the teaching of the Word of God.

Some Preliminary Observations

Before we look at some of the specifics regarding this all-important subject, we need to make some preliminary observations about this matter.

1. We Must Make Certain The Issues Are Properly Framed

To begin with, it is absolutely crucial that in this particular question, as with all other biblical issues, it is properly framed. Unfortunately many times this is not the case. Often, we see the question framed in such a way as to predetermine the answer. This should never be done.

For example, the question is often posed in this manner: Do you believe the God of the Bible, a God of love, is going to subject people to endless torture for all eternity merely because they did not believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior? Isn't this unfair and cruel? What kind of loving God would do something like this?

While the issue is sometimes framed in this way, there are a couple of assumptions which we should not let pass.

First, God does not "torture" anyone. The historical view of hell says that He "punishes" the wicked. This punishment is payback or retribution for rejecting Him through His Son Jesus Christ. It is the penalty for unbelief.

"Torture" has the idea of cruel, inhumane and sadistic treatment. This is not what the Bible says will occur, neither is it the historical view of hell. Hell is not torture.

In addition, we should not make light of the rejection of Jesus Christ as Savior. It is not something people "merely" do. God the Father sent God the Son into the world for a specific purpose, to die in our place so we would not have to suffer for our own sins.

This should *never* be minimized. Rejecting Jesus Christ is no small matter, and it should never be treated as such!

Therefore, at the outset, let us be careful how we frame this question. We should not use any type of language which predetermines our conclusion before we investigate what the Scripture says.

2. An Eternal Hell Has Been Historically Held By Christians

With very few exceptions, the historical view, that hell is a place of everlasting punishment for the wicked, has been held throughout church history. It has been the overwhelming belief of theologians, scholars, Bible-teachers, and lay people that Scripture teaches conscious punishment for the wicked for all eternity. While this, in-and-of-itself, does not make the doctrine true, it certainly has to be reckoned with.

Indeed, there must be reasons as to why the great majority of Bible-believers have held to this teaching. If they have been wrong about this, then it must be clearly shown *why* this is the case. Where specifically have these great men and women of the faith gone wrong in their understanding of the fate of the wicked?

Thus, if one wants to reject the historical view of hell, then a sufficient alternative answer must be given from Scripture, and from it alone.

3. Those Who Reject The Historical Belief Usually Do So For Other Than Biblical Reasons

This is an important point. While biblical reasons are often offered for the rejection of the historical doctrine of hell, almost all Christians admit that other motivations are actually determining their view on this issue.

Indeed, the reasons as to why certain Christians reject hell are more emotional, moral and philosophical than biblical. Though they have a biblical case to present, this is not what has made them reject the historical view of the everlasting punishment for the wicked.

For whatever reason, they cannot conceive that God would allow people to be endlessly punished for rejecting Jesus Christ. This does not fit with their conception of a God of love. Thus, the rejection of the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the wicked is not usually derived from someone reading the Scripture from Genesis to Revelation and then coming up with this particular belief based upon what they have read and studied.

In response, we should say that there is nothing wrong with this motivation, if it ultimately agrees with Scripture. If eternal conscious punishment is inconsistent with the character of the God revealed in Scripture, then it should be rejected.

But this is the question which must be answered. Does this particular view of the God of the Bible, and His nature, agree with what is taught in His revealed Word? In other words, does the biblical portrayal of the nature of God disallow Him to eternally punish unbelievers? This is what has to be answered from the Scripture; not from any preconceived idea of what a God of love could or could not do.

4. The Bible Must Be The Final Standard To Derive Answers: Our Personal Viewpoint Is Ultimately Meaningless

This leads us to the real question. When it comes to determining the truth about hell, our personal opinion is, in the end, meaningless. The issue is not what we think should happen, the issue is what the Lord *says* will happen. It matters not if we think the doctrine of eternal punishment of the wicked is somehow mean-spirited, cruel, against the idea of the love of God, or that it serves no useful purpose in eternity. If God gives us a clear Word about hell, then we have to accept what He says. End of story.

Indeed, Bible-believing Christians are not free to pick and choose various beliefs which please them, or make them happy, and then call that belief system “biblical Christianity.” This is not how it works. We must submit ourselves to Scripture. Indeed, the Bible is not to be submitted to our own particular belief system.

5. The Idea Of No Eternal Punishment Is Appealing To People

There is one final thing which should be noted. The idea that the wicked do not wind up in an eternal state of conscious suffering is appealing to most people. We would *like* this to be their eventual outcome. Nobody likes the idea of the wicked experiencing never-ending suffering.

Yet we cannot let our emotions become the main consideration when we evaluate this issue. Our primary consideration should be what God has said on the matter. We need to know what He says, and why He says it. At the end of the day, nothing else really matters.

Summary To Question 25 How Should We Approach The Study Of The Ultimate Fate Of The Wicked?

The study of the ultimate fate of non-believers is an important issue. Everyone agrees that this is the case. Therefore, at the beginning, it is imperative to know how we should address this matter if we are to rightly understand the issues which are involved. Consequently, before we approach such a significant topic, there are several things which must be understood.

First and foremost, we must make certain that the issues about the eternal fate of the wicked are properly framed. Often the questions about eternal punishment are asked in such a way as to demand a specific answer. This is wrong. Using clever language to state the issues in a certain manner, so as to gain a particular advantage in the debate, does not solve anything. Yet this is often done. Let us be careful to treat these matters in an objective manner, rather than predetermining the outcome with the way in which we frame the question.

As to the issue of the duration of hell, the ultimate fate of the wicked, it is important that we understand that the vast majority of Bible-believers

throughout church history have held to the belief of an eternal hell where unbelievers are consciously punished. Nobody denies this. While this does not end the discussion on this issue, it certainly needs to be taken into account. There are reasons why this has been so. Therefore, those who deny the historical view need to present a powerful case as to why Bible-believers should think differently.

There is something else which must be appreciated. Those who reject the doctrine of the everlasting punishment for the wicked do so for more than biblical reasons. While they do often appeal to Scripture to support their position, this is not usually the main reason as to why the historical doctrine is not accepted.

Almost all of the people who reject the eternal conscious punishment for the unrighteous do so for moral or philosophical reasons. Basically, they do not think that an eternal hell fits with the biblical idea of a God of love. This approach, while not wrong, must be admitted by those who have a different view from what has been historically believed.

However, the final standard, the only standard, must be Holy Scripture. What we believe about hell is not at issue. Indeed, it is what God says about it. Therefore, all of the arguments about what we think should happen to the wicked are ultimately meaningless. God's Word has the only say in this matter.

Finally, all of us, no matter what our stance on the fate of the lost, agree that the idea of eternal suffering is a horrible thought to contemplate. Nobody likes the idea of everlasting conscious punishment for those who do not believe. Indeed, this is one reason why many people are rejecting the historical view of hell. It is certainly more appealing to believe that the wicked will either be annihilated at some time in the future, or will eventually end up in heaven.

Yet we cannot let what appeals to our emotions determine what we believe, or what we proclaim as God's truth. To solve this issue we must do so by investigating the only source which can give us the answer, the Word of the living God, the Bible.

Question 26

What Are The Various Conclusions People Have Reached Concerning The Final State Of Unbelievers?

Whenever the subject of the ultimate fate of the wicked is talked about, it is frequently a lively discussion! Whether or not one believes in Scripture as the final authority, people usually have definite views on this subject. Therefore, it is important to survey the various theories about hell before looking at each of them in depth.

Consequently, before we delve deep into this issue we will summarize the main positions that people hold.

The Various Views Of Non-Bible Believers

First, we will survey the options of those who do not accept the authority of Scripture. How do they view the question of the ultimate fate of the wicked? Generally speaking, their ideas can be briefly summed up as follows.

Option 1: The Dead Go Out Of Existence

This perspective sees human existence as equal to human life here upon the earth. Once life is over, then existence is over. This is true for everyone. There is no life after death, so it does not matter, whether or not, if one is wicked. The good and the bad suffer the same fate. Those who hold this particular view do not see the Bible as any type of authority on this subject, or any subject for that matter. Once we are dead, we are dead. End of story.

Option 2: The Dead Come Back In Successive Lives (Reincarnation)

There are those who assume that there is life after death, but not the kind of life which Scripture talks about. Everyone, good and bad, comes back to life as another human being, they are reincarnated. While reincarnation takes on various forms, the consistent teaching is that this life is not all that there is. We have lived many past lives as different people, and we will live many more lives as other people.

Life and death are part of a continuous cycle of existence. Thus, there is no ultimate Judgment Day for those who are wicked.

Option 3: The Views Of Non-Christian Religions

Non-Christian religions have their own conception of the afterlife. This varies from religion to religion. However, none of them teaches the same truths as we find in Scripture. There is no idea of hell in the same sense as we find in the Bible. Hell is a uniquely Christian doctrine.

The Various Ways Bible-Believers Approach The Subject

For Christians, the Bible is only source to ultimately solve theological or spiritual issues. There have been a number of ways in which this subject of the fate of the wicked has been approached by those who do accept the authority of the Bible.

Some see the answers as being clearly laid out in Scripture while others think that no ultimate resolution to this question can be determined. We can summarize the main views as follows.

Option 1: The Bible Is Clear: The Wicked Are Eternally Punished

The first option is that the Bible is clear on this subject, the wicked, like the believers, will exist forever. Believers will exist eternally in God's presence while unbelievers will be eternally banished from His presence. Believers will experience eternal happiness while the wicked will undergo eternal conscious punishment.

According to this position, there is no annihilation of unbelievers, no chance for them to believe once this life is over, and no eventual salvation of those in hell.

Destinies are forever fixed when this life ends. This is the historical view of the church.

Option 2: The Bible Is Clear: Wicked Humanity Will Not Suffer Eternally

There are others who also believe that the Bible is clear on this subject but they come to an entirely different conclusion. They believe the Bible teaches that the wicked will one day be annihilated, merely cease to exist. This view comes in various forms.

Position A: Conditional Immortality: Humans Are Not Immortal By Nature

Conditional immortality is the position that humans are not immortal by nature, only God is immortal. While God grants immortality to humans, He only grants it to believers. In other words, only believers will live forever. They argue that Paul made this point clear when he said that believers will "put on immortality" when they are given a resurrected body. This means immortality is something we do not have unless God grants it. Thus, unbelievers, who do not have immortality, will eventually cease to exist.

Position B: Annihilationism: Human Beings Are Immortal By Nature But Unbelievers Will Lose Their Immortality

This position says that all humans are granted immortality by God, but that unbelievers will lose that immortality if they reject Jesus. In other words,

God takes certain actions to keep these people from remaining immortal, they are annihilated.

While the outcome for unbelievers is the same as the previous option, the reasoning is different. This position states that all humans are created immortal but God has the right to remove that immorality from those who do not believe in Him. Loss of immortality is the punishment for unbelief. The previous theory says humans are not immortal, but God graciously grants immortality to believers only.

Furthermore, those who hold to either position A or position B are not agreed upon as to when this cessation of existence will happen. Some believe it will happen at death, some at the Last Judgment, others believe it will occur after people have been punished for some time after the Last Judgment. Yet, all see the same eventual result for unbelievers, they will be annihilated, they will merely cease to exist.

**Option 3: The Bible Is Clear. It Teaches Universalism:
The Wicked Will Eventually Be Saved**

There is also the viewpoint that the wicked will eventually enter heaven. Among other things, this is known as “universalism.” People come to this conclusion in a number of different ways. This includes the following.

One way concerns how human beings are viewed. Some believe that humans are by nature immortal, while others think that God has granted immortality to every human being. Either way, humans will never cease to exist.

In addition, they also believe that the Bible teaches that the punishment the wicked will receive for their sins is not eternal. Thus, they logically conclude that the wicked must one day be restored to God’s favor. Once the punishment is completed, then restoration is an absolute necessity.

Others see universalism as the logical result of the work of Christ. Since Jesus has already taken the penalty of the sins of the world upon Himself, it is not necessary that anyone suffer for their sins.

The only sin for which people will be judged is the rejection of Jesus. However, it is possible for a person who has rejected Jesus to eventually change their mind and believe in Him. This can happen even after death. Because of the irresistible work of the Spirit of God toward unbelievers, the final result will be the salvation of everyone.

These two ways illustrate how Bible-believers can come to the conclusion that everyone will eventually join the Lord in heaven.

**Option 4: The Bible Is Not Clear About The
Fate Of The Wicked**

Some people insist that the Bible isn’t totally clear on the subject. There are passages which seem to support the idea of everlasting punishment for

the wicked, while there are others which seem to say that the wicked will be destroyed or annihilated.

Others see the possibility of everyone eventually being saved. Since there seem to be conflicting passages on these issues, we should not be overly confident in our particular position. In other words, the Bible gives no specific teachings as to the exact fate of the wicked. Consequently, we should keep this as an open issue. Nobody has the final answer on this subject.

This briefly sums up the various conclusions people have come to about the ultimate destiny of the wicked.

To find the answer, we must go to the only source which can give it to us, God's Word, the Bible.

Summary To Question 26

What Are The Various Conclusions People Have Reached Concerning The Final Destination Of The Wicked?

What will happen to those who do not believe in Jesus Christ? Do we know what their eternal destiny will be? There are various opinions from both believers and unbelievers. We can summarize them as follows.

First, there are the unbelievers. Those who do not accept the authority of Scripture do not believe in any everlasting punishment for the wicked; at least not in the sense the Bible describes. There is the common belief that the dead, whether good or bad, merely go out of existence. Human life is limited to our human body. Once the body dies, then life is over. Thus, the whole question of hell is not an issue since there will be no "Judgment Day."

The doctrine of reincarnation says that those who die come back in successive lives as different human beings. In other words, death is a process which occurs over and over again. This human life which we are now living is not all that there is. However, there is no ultimate day of judgment for the wicked.

Non-Christian religions have various views of the fate of the wicked but none of them are the same as the biblical perspective. Each of these views denies the biblical teaching concerning the destiny of those who reject Jesus Christ.

Among Bible believers, there are three main options about the ultimate destiny of the wicked which are presently held.

First, there is the historical view. Historically, Christians have believed and taught that the wicked will spend eternity apart from God's presence in a place called hell. Hell consists of never-ending conscious punishment for unbelievers. It is a horrible place, but it is a place where all unbelievers, as well as Satan and the sinning angels, must go.

Not every Christian thinks the Bible teaches everlasting punishment for the wicked. Some believe in what is known as conditional immortality. This perspective, also called “conditionalism,” says humans, by nature, are mortal creatures. God only grants immortality to believers; the wicked will merely cease to exist once this life is over.

Others contend that humans are immortal by nature but that God removes that immortality from the wicked by annihilating them once this life is over. This is often called “annihilation proper.” Those who hold the view, that the wicked will eventually become non-existent, sometimes combine the elements of conditionalism and annihilation proper.

Indeed, these two views, though different, are often spoken of interchangeably. They are merely referred to as annihilationism. While there are variations of these views, everyone ends up with the same conclusion, the wicked are not eternally punished in a conscious existence. They will merely cease to exist.

Exactly when this annihilation will happen is not agreed upon. Some believe it will happen at death, some at the resurrection of the dead, while others think the wicked will suffer some type of punishment after the last judgment. However, whatever punishment they do receive will not be eternal. After a certain amount of time, their punishment will cease.

There is also the belief that everyone will one day leave hell. This is known as universalism. Because of God’s grace, the sinner will eventually be restored to Him and His holy presence. This also takes on a number of forms.

Some think it will happen after the wicked have suffered for a specific period of time. Thus, hell is more like purgatory where unbelievers are purged of theirs sins before they can enter heaven. Once purged, heaven’s door swings open wide for them.

There are some Bible-believers who do not think that the Scripture clearly teaches any of these options. To them, the issue cannot be resolved by looking at various passages in the Bible. For whatever reason, God did not make the answer obvious. Therefore, it is contended that nobody has the right to come to any firm conclusion on the subject of hell.

This sums up the views of the fate of the wicked from a number of perspectives. The key is to discover exactly what Scripture says on this issue.

Question 27

What Is The General Case Which Is Made For The Unbelieving Dead Becoming Non-existent, Destroyed Or Annihilated? (Annihilationism, Conditional Immortality Conditionalism, Limited Suffering)

Annihilationism is a popular belief, even among Christians, and it has been growing more popular in recent years. Simply put, the doctrine of annihilationism is the teaching that the Lord will condemn the wicked to eventual extinction. This is also known as the “second death.” Those who die apart from Him will simply pass out of existence. In other words, they will be no more.

Annihilationists, therefore, deny that there is an eternal place of torment or punishment known as hell. When the Bible speaks of hell, it means the annihilation of the individual, it is not everlasting punishment. The wicked are reduced to nothing, to non-existence. There is no such thing as the eternal existence and conscious punishment for the wicked.

Therefore, most annihilationists believe in hell, but they do not believe hell consists of the eternal suffering for the wicked. This distinction must be kept in mind.

Annihilationists believe that the Bible does not categorically teach the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked. Indeed, they contend that the annihilationist view is an alternative way to interpret the biblical text and it is equally orthodox as the historical view of eternal conscious punishment.

Variations Within The Annihilationist Belief

Within this basic idea of annihilationism, a number of variations arise. In other words, not everyone who believes in the eternal extinction of the wicked will agree upon what happens before this takes place. We can provide some examples.

Jehovah's Witnesses

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, the Jehovah's Witnesses, do not believe that the spirit or soul survives at death. In other words, all consciousness ceases at the death of a person. This is known as “soul sleep” or “soul extinction.” Accordingly, they teach that some persons, like Judas Iscariot, will go permanently out of existence upon their death. In other words, they never return to life.

Other sinners will be raised from a non-existence state during Jehovah's earthly kingdom, the Millennium. At that time, they will be given a chance to accept the offer to be part of His kingdom. Those who reject the offer will be annihilated.

Seventh-day Adventism

Seventh-day Adventism has a different take on the annihilation of the wicked. They also reject the idea that the “soul” or “spirit” survives once the body dies.

The wicked will be re-created on the day of judgment. At that time, God will punish the unrighteous for a certain amount of time that He alone determines. This punishment consists of conscious pain and suffering. However, it will come to an end and then the wicked will be entirely consumed, they will be annihilated.

The Dead Are Conscious In The Intermediate State

There are other variations which annihilationists hold. For example, some would contend that the wicked do not go out of existence, but rather suffer some punishment in the intermediate state, the time between death and the resurrection of the dead. Thus, they reject the idea of “soul sleep.” Instead they believe that dead would only cease to exist after they are raised, judged and then punished for some indeterminate time.

Others believe that the souls of the wicked do exist in the in-between state, but there is no conscious punishment while waiting for the day of judgment.

Limited Suffering

There is another position that says suffering in hell will be for a limited duration. There is conscious suffering but the suffering is not eternal. After the suffering is complete, the wicked are then annihilated.

Restorationism

This theory teaches that the wicked are restored to life to be given a chance to believe in Jesus Christ the afterlife. Those rejecting Christ are then annihilated.

Whatever the particular form, annihilationism teaches that some human beings will not exist eternally. The only ones who will live forever are those who have trusted God’s promises and believed His message.

Two Points Of Agreement

While annihilationists disagree on what happens to the wicked after death, they all agree on a couple of points.

First, the ultimate destiny of the unrighteous is annihilation, the extinction of their being. Second, this annihilation of the wicked is eternal. In other words, once the person is annihilated, they cannot ever be brought back to life, the sentence can never be reversed. These two points are held by all annihilationists.

The Arguments For Annihilation In Its Various Forms

There are a number of reasons why people embrace the idea of the annihilation of the wicked in its various forms. Some reasons are emotional, some philosophical, and some are biblical.

Furthermore, not everyone who accepts the ultimate annihilation of the wicked argues in the same manner. While they come to the same conclusions, they do not all get there the same way. Therefore, some of the arguments presented may contradict other arguments.

In this question, we will summarize the general arguments used for annihilationism, the ultimate cessation of existence of the wicked. In the following questions, we will look at each specific argument and evaluate it from a biblical perspective. This will not only give us an overview of the case for annihilationism, it will also answer provide an in-depth look at the various points made.

Generally speaking, the arguments used to support the idea of the ultimate cessation of existence of the wicked are as follows.

1. Human Beings Are Not Immortal By Nature: Only Believers Will Exist Forever (Conditionalism)

One argument which is popular among annihilationists is that human beings, by nature, are not immortal. This is known as conditionalism or conditional immortality. Immortality, it is contended, is a concept which the church has wrongly borrowed from Greek philosophy. It is a pagan belief, not the teaching of Scripture.

When the Bible speaks of immortality, it refers to the glorified body that Jesus Christ will give to believers at His Coming. Immortality is thus conferred upon people by the Lord, and it is only believers who receive this immortality.

Therefore, life after death is based upon the resurrection of the body, not the natural immorality of the soul. Those who do not believe in Christ Jesus will merely pass out of existence. They will be annihilated.

2. Humans Are Immortal But God Will Take Away The Immortality Of The Wicked (Annihilation Proper)

This is the opposite of the preceding point. Some who hold to annihilationism believe that humans are indeed immortal by nature. However, as a punishment for unbelief, this immortality is withdrawn by the Lord. The Lord acts upon them in judgment and removes this immortality.

While it differs from the first point in the way that it views human beings, the end result for the wicked will be the same, they will eventually cease to exist.

3. Eternal Suffering Is A Repulsive Belief

We now come to one of the main reasons as to why an eternal hell is rejected. The idea of eternal suffering is abhorrent to many minds. It is a repulsive belief.

Indeed, the God of the Bible is said to be a God of love. The Bible itself defines God that way. John wrote:

He who does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:8 NKJV).

It is concluded that a God of love would not allow anyone to suffer conscious torment forever. Though not everyone deserves to be saved, no one deserves eternal punishment.

4. Biblical Terms And Symbols Indicate The Wicked Are Annihilated, Not Eternally Punished

The Bible gives a number of terms and symbols which illustrate the ultimate fate of the wicked. These include fire, destruction, death and separation. It is claimed that these symbols can be better understood to refer to the annihilation of the wicked rather than eternal punishment.

5. There Is Eternal Punishment In Its Effects, Not In Its Duration

The distinction is often made that the punishment for the wicked is eternal in that the unbelievers will never be allowed into the presence of the Lord, however, the punishing itself is not eternal.

The argument usually goes like this. The punishment is eternal in its effects, but it is not eternal in time or duration. They are punished “for all eternity,” but not continually punished “in eternity.” Instead, they are annihilated.

Therefore, the effect would be that the person would never experience God’s blessings for eternity, not that the person would suffer or be continually punished in eternity. This is an important distinction.

6. Eternal Punishment Would Be Disproportionate To The Sins Committed

This is a popular argument. The punishment does not fit the crime. Sin only occurs in time, not eternity. Sins committed in time should not be punished for eternity. Eternal suffering is beyond what justice demands. It is not proportionate to the offense.

Since the Bible says that the God of Scripture is fair, He would never punish anyone beyond what they deserve.

7. Evil Would Continue To Exist In The Universe If Hell Was Eternal

If there was an eternal hell, then the continuing presence of evil in the universe would mar God's perfection. How could there be a new heaven and new earth while a place of eternal suffering and misery for humans still exists?

Everlasting punishment is difficult to reconcile with what the Bible says about the future universe which is free from sin. Paul wrote:

And this is his plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ--everything in heaven and on earth (Ephesians 1:10 NLT).

All things are under the authority of Jesus Christ. How could this be true if people are being tormented in hell?

The Apostle Paul wrote about how God would reconcile all things to Himself. He explained it this way:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:19-20 ESV).

Again, how can all things be reconciled to God if the wicked are consciously suffering for their sins for all eternity?

8. There Is Only Never-Ending Torment For The Devil, The Beast, And The False Prophet,

Some have argued that the never-ending torment is only for the devil, the beast, and the false prophet. Humans are not specifically said to be tormented eternally. Rather it is only these evil beings who will suffer this fate. In the Book of Revelation it specifically says that torment is reserved for these beings, not for everyone. We read the following:

Then the Devil, who betrayed them, was thrown into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur, joining the beast and the false prophet. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 NLT).

Consequently, eternal suffering, while true, is limited to these three personages.

9. Biblical Passages Can Be Understood To Teach Annihilation

As one searches the Scripture, one will find a number of biblical passages, in both testaments, which are consistent with the idea of the eventual annihilation of the wicked. When read in a normal or literal sense, these

passages do not speak of eternal punishment. Indeed, they are more naturally understood to mean the wicked will merely cease to exist.

While there are a number of biblical passages which are used to teach everlasting punishment, those who believe that the wicked will be annihilated have different interpretations of these passages. They believe these verses can be reconciled with the ultimate destruction, or annihilation, of the wicked.

This being the case, we should assume that the wicked are allowed to pass out of existence. In other words, they are annihilated.

Consequently, we should not take the stance that they have to suffer eternally.

10. The Doctrine Of An Eternal Hell Is A Hindrance To The Gospel

There is also the accusation that the doctrine of an eternal hell is a needless barrier which keeps unbelievers from believing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since the thought of the wicked eternally suffering for their sins is so repulsive to unbelievers, it actually keeps them from coming to know the loving God revealed in the pages of Scripture. Thus, we are doing a disservice to God by preaching an eternal hell.

11. Church History Shows There Have Always Been Other Alternatives

Finally, it is contended that an examination of church history will demonstrate that the historical view of everlasting conscious punishment, has always had competition with other viewpoints, including the annihilationist view. In other words, there were always Christians who held to the belief that the wicked would eventually become annihilated.

Evaluation Of Annihilationism In Its Various Forms

These are the main arguments found in the writings of those who advocate the ultimate non-existence of the wicked. At the outset, we acknowledge that many people who hold this view are sincere Bible-believing Christians who truly believe that Scripture does not teach the everlasting punishment of the wicked.

As mentioned, they also contend that the annihilationist view is a viable alternative to the historical view and should be seen as another orthodox position on the question.

However, the real issue in this debate is not whether God could annihilate the wicked, He certainly could if He wished to do so. The real issue is whether there is any reason to think that God in fact intends to do so. And this question can be answered only by looking at the Bible.

As we have seen, those Bible-believers, who hold that the wicked will eventually cease to exist, come to their conclusions in different ways. Each argument deserves special attention. Therefore, the following questions will look at each of these points in detail.

In doing so, we will discover that the case for annihilationism, in its various forms, does not fit the totality of the teaching of the Word of God on the subject of the eternal destiny of the wicked.

In other words, though sincere believers embrace the doctrine of the eventual annihilation of the wicked, we believe that they are sincerely wrong. Indeed, the evidence will make this clear.

Summary To Question 27

What Is The General Case Which Is Made For The Unbelieving Dead Becoming Non-existent, Destroyed Or Annihilated? (Annihilationism, Conditional Immortality, Conditionalism, Limited Suffering)

The historical view among Bible-believing Christians is that the wicked will be punished eternally in hell for their refusal to accept God's gracious offer of the forgiveness of sin through the Person of Jesus Christ. Their suffering is conscious, and it is everlasting. Scripture clearly teaches that this is the ultimate fate of the lost.

Not all Christians accept the historical view as being the correct one. One of the opposing positions is that of annihilationism. Annihilationism is a general term which is used for the doctrine that the wicked will cease to exist, instead of being continually punished for all eternity. It comes in a number of different forms. They are as follows.

Conditional immortality says that only God has immortality but that He graciously grants it to believers. They will exist forever in His glorious presence in a state of unending joy and happiness. Unbelievers, on the other hand, will not be granted immortality so they will be made to be extinct. There is no eternal hell for the wicked. They will be annihilated.

Restorationism teaches that unbelievers will be restored to life and given a chance to believe. Those who don't believe will be annihilated. They will not consciously suffer in hell for eternity. Nobody will.

Limited suffering says that the wicked will suffer for some period of time in hell, the lake of fire, and then be annihilated. It is a temporary place of punishment, not an eternal one.

Often these views are spoken of under the heading of annihilationism though technically this is not correct. There are differences between them which are not always acknowledged or understood by those using the terms. Whatever the case may be, they all understand the Bible as teaching the wicked will not eternally suffer.

Those who hold this view of annihilationism argue that eternal suffering is a horrible doctrine. They believe the wicked are destroyed, not eternally punished. While the results of the punishment are eternal, the individual does not personally suffer for all of eternity. They are punished “for all eternity” in that they are not allowed to be in God’s presence, but they are not punished forever “in eternity” for their sins.

To sum up, their eternal punishment involves their separation from God and all of His goodness. In other words, the punishment is eternal, but the punishing is not. This distinction must be kept in mind.

It is also contended that eternal suffering is not consistent with the sins which are committed. An eternal hell is all out of proportion with any wrongdoing which was done. The punishment must fit the crime. Eternal punishment does not fit the crime of sinning for a few short years in time.

Those who hold this perspective also stress the fact that evil will continue in the universe, if the wicked are allowed to eternally exist in a state of unbelief. This, they argue, is not consistent with what the Lord says about what will happen in the future.

Indeed, Scripture says that God will reconcile all things to Himself. This is hard to harmonize with the idea of the eternal suffering of the wicked. How can it be a brand-new perfect world when there are countless people suffering eternally?

It is for these reasons that people have embraced the idea of the ultimate annihilation of the wicked. However, as we shall see, while these arguments are given by sincere Christians, in their attempt to understand the biblical view of the destiny of the wicked, we believe that when all the evidence is in, they are sincerely wrong.

Question 28

Are Humans Immortal By Nature Or Is Immortality Something Which God Gives Only To Believers? (Conditional Immortality)

One of the arguments used by those who reject the idea of an eternal hell concerns the nature of human beings. The historical view of hell assumes that the human soul is immortal, it can never pass out of existence. However, there is a view called conditional immortality, or conditionalism, which has another perspective of human nature which contradicts this idea.

According to conditionalism, the historical view of hell has a basic assumption which is not biblical. The soul is assumed to be immortal; it cannot be destroyed. Those holding to the historical view argue as follows. Since the soul is immortal, it must go somewhere after death. If not heaven, then it must go to hell for eternity where the person consciously suffers. Consequently, an eternal hell must exist. This sums up the historical view.

Conditionalists claim this is a mistaken belief. They contend that the church has accepted the false belief that all human beings are immortal by nature. This, they claim, is contrary to Scripture. God grants immortality to believers only. This being the case, it is not necessary to assume that there must be an eternal hell for unbelievers. Instead of everlasting punishment, the wicked will merely cease to exist, they will become extinct. This is their punishment.

The Case For Conditional Immortality

Those who hold to conditionalism usually base their belief on a number of points. We can simply sum up their arguments as follows.

1. The Bible Does Not Say That Humans Are Immortal By Nature

Those who embrace the belief of conditional immortality contend that immortality or deathlessness is not something which is basic to the makeup of human beings. Usually it is argued that the potential for immortality was originally given to Adam and Eve. However, this possible immortality, or conditional immortality, was lost when the first couple disobeyed. When Adam and Eve sinned, the human race lost its immortality. We have never gained it back.

2. The Church Borrowed The Idea Of Immortality From The Greeks

It is also claimed that the idea of the immortality of the soul is not a Jewish or Christian idea, rather it was borrowed from Greek philosophy. The church has mistakenly assumed that humans are immortal by nature. Scripture, it is argued, never teaches this.

3. The Idea Of Immortality Of The Soul Is Held In Other Religions

It is also sometimes mentioned that the immortality of the soul is not a uniquely Christian doctrine. In fact, many religions believe that the soul of a human being is immortal.

These reasons have caused many to reject the idea of the immortality of the soul. They argue that the soul or spirit of human beings is not immortal by nature, and the Bible does not teach that it is. God alone is immortal.

Lost Immortality Is Regained Through Jesus

The gospel or “good news” is that this lost immortality has been restored to humanity through Jesus Christ. The Bible says the following of Him:

Who [Christ] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:9,10 ESV).

Jesus Christ has brought immortality. However, this immortality is given only to believers. It is something which God bestows. He alone can do this because He alone is, by nature, immortal. Paul wrote of Him:

Who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen (1 Timothy 6:16 ESV).

This immortality will be bestowed upon those who believe in the Lord. This will occur when they receive their glorified bodies at the time of the resurrection of the dead.

The Lost Do Not Suffer Eternally

On the other hand, those who have rejected God’s truth will suffer the fate that Jesus warned against. The Lord said:

Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28 CSB).

Unbelievers will be destroyed after this life is over. In other words, they will have no conscious existence for eternity for they are not immortal by nature.

Therefore, those who hold to the belief in conditional immortality presume that many Christians have made a critical mistake in their understanding of the nature of human beings by assuming the immortality of the soul for all humans.

This leads to the logical conclusion that if the souls of human beings must live forever because they are immortal by nature, then unbelievers must be consciously punished forever, for they cannot cease to exist.

Those who hold to conditional immortality think that is a wrong assumption. Only God is immortal by nature. Humans were created with only potentially immortality which was lost with the sin of Adam and Eve. Immortality is now available to humanity but only to those who have trusted in Jesus Christ.

Since the wicked, the unbelievers, were never given this gift of immortality, they will not exist forever. Instead, they will be annihilated after receiving a certain degree of punishment for their sins. Consequently, there is no immortality for them.

Response To The Conditional Immortality Argument

The argument that immortality is limited to believers only is a common one among annihilationists. Yet it does not fit the facts for a number of reasons. They can be summed up as follows.

The Idea Has Not Been Borrowed From Greek Philosophy

The doctrine of everlasting punishment has not been borrowed from the Greeks. In fact, there are two main differences between the ancient Greek view of the immortality of the soul and the view of Scripture.

For one thing, the Bible teaches that the spirit or soul is immortal, or cannot ever cease to exist, once it comes into existence. However, it has no existence until conception. The Greeks, on the other hand, believed that souls pre-existed before they were joined to a body.

Thus, while both the Bible and ancient Greeks believed that the spirit was immortal, the biblical view is that it is immortal only from the time the person has been conceived.

There is a second difference. The ancient Greeks saw the soul as possessing inherent immortality. Again we stress that the biblical view assumes that only God has immortality. While He grants it to humans, this is not something we inherently possess. Our ability to survive after death is derived from the God of the Bible, and from Him alone. He, and He alone, has determined that everyone who has ever been born, believer and unbeliever, will consciously survive throughout all eternity. This is the reason as to why humans exist forever.

Immortality Of The Soul Is What The Bible Teaches

There is something else. The majority of Christians down through the ages have concluded that there is eternal conscious punishment for the wicked. The reason they hold this position is simply due to the fact that they believe this is what the Bible teaches about the subject! Their conclusion on the fate of the wicked is derived from a study of Scripture.

In addition, it is also wrong to say that those who hold the historical view of an everlasting punishment for the wicked in hell do so mainly because they believe in the immortality of the human soul. This is not the case. They understand only God is by nature immortal.

However, they believe the Bible teaches that He granted immortality, or never-ending existence, to all human beings, believers and unbelievers alike. He has created us in such a way that we will never cease to exist. The fact that Scripture consistently teaches that the lost never perish, or cease to exist, in the afterlife supports this idea.

Believers Will Live Forever In A Glorified Body They Will Not Merely Be A Soul

One final point needs to be emphasized. The biblical view is that believers will live eternally, not as a bodiless soul, but rather in a glorified body. The emphasis is not on the soul, but rather on the glorified body each of us will receive.

Thus, the argument that the Christian church has borrowed the idea of the immortality of human beings from the ancient Greeks does not fit the facts. Not only do we find that the Greeks taught something entirely different about the immortality of the soul, we also find that the belief of immortality, or everlasting existence, stems from the totality of the teaching of Scripture.

Therefore, the argument of the annihilationist, from the nature of the human soul, does not fit the biblical facts.

If a case for annihilationism is to be made, it is not from this argument.

Summary To Question 28

Are Humans Immortal By Nature Or Is Immortality Something Which God Gives Only To Believers? (Conditional Immortality)

One of the primary objections to the historical view of the everlasting conscious punishment for the wicked has to do with the nature of human beings. It is the argument of those who hold the position of conditional immortality, sometimes called conditionalism.

Simply stated, they contend that human beings are not immortal by nature. God grants immortality only to those humans who believe in Him while unbelievers merely cease to exist. In other words, He does not subject them to everlasting punishment. Consequently, it is not necessary to believe in an eternal hell for the wicked. The case for conditionalism is usually argued along the following lines.

To begin with, conditionalism believes that the church has historically embraced the wrong assumption concerning the nature of human beings. There has been the unbiblical belief that the human soul is immortal. This was wrongly borrowed from Greek philosophy. This mistaken belief had led people to logically conclude that if the soul is immortal, then it must

spend eternity somewhere in a conscious state, for it cannot go out of existence. It follows that if the soul does not end up in heaven, then it must go to hell.

Thus, the idea of an everlasting hell, a place of punishment for the wicked, is based upon the belief that humans are inherently immortal. Yet, conditionalists assert this is not what the Bible teaches.

Indeed, conditionalism argues that this basis for believing in hell is founded on a wrong assumption. The human soul is not immortal. Immortality belongs to God alone. While humans are not immortal by nature, Jesus Christ brought immortality to those who believe in Him. Therefore, believers will live forever in His presence in a state of conscious eternal happiness! Yet no such destiny is in store for the wicked.

Unlike the believers, the wicked have not been given immortality. Since they are not by nature immortal, it is not essential that they survive forever.

Consequently, the eternal continuing punishment of the wicked is not their destiny; for human beings are *not* made for eternity. Since most Christians have wrongly accepted this idea of the immortality of the human soul, they have also wrongly accepted the idea that the wicked must be consciously punished for eternity. This is incorrect. Their punishment will be annihilation. They will never be able to share in the joys of heaven. This, simply stated, is the argument for conditional immortality.

While this objection is popular, it has little basis in fact. The reason that most Christians have historically presumed that every human being will exist forever in a conscious state is not because of their acceptance of the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul. Instead, it is because of their belief that the Bible teaches that humans will eternally exist!

In other words, we believe that every person will eternally exist because the Bible says so. We discover this to be true in the biblical description of eternity where both believers and unbelievers continue to exist. Therefore, it does not matter, one way or the other, what the Greeks believed.

In fact, the Greek belief of the immortality of the soul is different from the Christian belief in two important areas.

First, the Greeks believed that souls preexisted. They reasoned that before a person was conceived their soul already existed. This is contrary to Scripture and the historical teaching of the church; human beings do not exist before they are conceived.

In addition, we do not believe merely in the immortality of the soul. We accept as true that the eternal part of each believer will live forever in a glorified body, a body which Jesus Christ will one day give to all those who believe in Him. In sum, immortality is something that is “put on” at the time believers are given their new body.

Unbelievers will also exist eternally in some sort of body, but it will not be the glorified body which believers are promised.

While it is true that God alone possesses immortality, He has made human beings in His likeness. The consistent teaching of Scripture is that this likeness will never be destroyed. Those who reject Him will remain in a conscious state forever, but they will be separated from His holy presence.

Scripture does not teach that unbelievers will cease to exist, or be annihilated. This is why we have come to the conclusion that humans have been created to exist forever.

Therefore, the objection that everlasting existence is only given to believers is not biblically based for unbelievers will never cease to exist. Consequently, the argument against an eternal hell, from the nature of human beings, does not stand.

Question 29

Since God Is Love Does This Mean That He Would Never Send Anyone To An Eternal Hell?

Probably the main objection that is raised against the idea of eternal conscious suffering for unbelievers has to do with the love of God. A loving God would do no such thing, and the God of the Bible is called a God of love. John wrote:

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (1 John 4:8 NIV).

The fact that the God of Scripture is specifically called a God of love has caused many people to reject the idea of everlasting conscious punishment for the wicked. The arguments usually run as follows.

1. What Type Of Loving God Would He Be?

If the God of the Bible is a God of love, it is asked, “What type of loving God could rejoice for all eternity with the believers in heaven, while, at the same time, the cries and screams of the wicked are constantly sounding out as they are being tormented in hell?” This scenario certainly does not fit a God of love.

How could a God of love allow this to occur? Since this does not make sense, we should not assume that the wicked will be banished to a place of endless suffering.

2. God Would Be Merciless If The Wicked Suffered Eternally

There is something else. The historical view of hell teaches that the punishment of God never ceases. A God who ceaselessly torments the wicked for all eternity would be a God without mercy. Seemingly, He would be more like the devil than God! It is asked, “How is it possible that anyone could worship such a merciless being?”

Many people conclude that we should not worship such a being, for He would not be a God of love.

3. The Real Punishment Is Not Conscious Torment: It Is Keeping Them Out Of Heaven

The solution to this problem is realizing that the God of Scripture does not eternally punish the wicked with conscious torment. His punishment of the wicked consists of keeping them out of His joyous presence for all eternity, it is not everlasting conscious punishment.

Thus, the answer to the problems that the historical view brings is found in the ultimate annihilation of the wicked. When Christians study what the Scripture says on the subject of hell, they will realize this is what the Bible

teaches about the fate of the wicked. The idea of eternal conscious punishment is not the biblical view.

Response To This Objection

This argument against eternal conscious punishment has convinced many that the historical view of hell does not fit the biblical picture of God. Modern humanity certainly has difficulty understanding how God can be both a loving God, and at the same time, punish the wicked for all eternity.

However, in response, a number of points need to be made.

1. God Is Love, But We Need To Know What Love Means

For one thing, the Bible stresses the love of God. Nobody questions this. Yet we must understand exactly what that means. It does not mean, as some contend, that God would never do anything to cause pain or suffering to anyone.

On the contrary, a study of the Bible shows us that God sometimes acts in such a way that causes pain and suffering to certain people. However, this is never arbitrary. In fact, it is always for the sake of a greater good or to punish wrongdoing.

Therefore, we need a consistent picture of what it means that God is a God of love.

2. Humans Are Not Qualified To Decide This Issue

There is something else. The problem with saying what a loving God can or cannot do, assumes that we humans are qualified, in and of ourselves, to make such judgments. However, it is improper to base our views of the afterlife on what *we* think God should be like.

Instead, we are limited to what God Himself has declared in His Word. Scripture alone must tell humanity about God's nature, and what He has planned for the world to come. As we examine the Bible, we find that God made both heaven and hell. In explaining God's judgment on the nations, Jesus used the illustration of a king:

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ (Matthew 25:34 ESV).

The righteous will inherit the kingdom. However, the king then said the following to the others, the unbelievers:

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. . . . And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:41,46 ESV).

Notice that hell, the eternal fire, the place of everlasting punishment, has actually been created by a God of love! This is what the Jesus taught on the subject. The same loving and holy God, who has made heaven for those who believe in His Son, has also created hell for those who reject Him. Jesus' statement could not be clearer.

The Same Word Describes Both Heaven And Hell

Furthermore, the same Greek adjective translated as “eternal” describes both heaven and hell. Believers will experience eternal life, while unbelievers will suffer eternal punishment. Whether we like it or not, this is what Scripture teaches on the subject.

3. Unbelievers Send Themselves To Hell

Finally, we must stress that God actually sends nobody to hell. Indeed, people send themselves to hell by not believing in Jesus. While the God of the Bible is a God of love, He also gives people choice. We can choose to love Him, or we can choose to reject Him. Those who end up in hell are individuals who have personally chosen to reject the God of Scripture and His love.

Thus, while the God of the Bible is a God of love, His love must be viewed in the light of His righteousness and judgment. Sin must be paid for. We have a choice to let Jesus Christ pay for our sins or we must pay for them ourselves. Consequently, we determine our own destiny.

Summary To Question 29

Since God Is Love Does This Mean That He Would Never Send Anyone To An Eternal Hell?

The Bible says that the God of Scripture is a God of love. Indeed, the Lord has said this about Himself. Furthermore, He demonstrates His love time and time again to the human race. Scripture is certainly clear on this subject; the God of the Bible is indeed a God of love.

This being the case, how can anyone suppose that this loving God would send unbelievers to an everlasting place of punishment? This seems so out of character with the God of the Bible, a God of love. How can God, who showed that He loved the world by sending His Son to die for our sins, eternally torment those who reject that love? This doesn't make sense.

Many Bible-believers, therefore, think that annihilation, not everlasting punishment, is the proper sentence for those who reject God and His promises. The punishment of the wicked will consist of these individuals being separated from His holy presence for all eternity. They will never experience the incredible joys of heaven. This is punishment enough.

There is something else we must consider. How can anyone willingly serve or worship such a being who would eternally torment the lost? The answer is that we do not have to worship such a being! Indeed, God is not going

to do this. The wicked will be destroyed or annihilated for their rejection of God. They will not be eternally punished in a conscious state.

Consequently, the doctrine of the everlasting punishment of the wicked supposedly contradicts what the Bible has to say about God and His loving nature. Accordingly, the historical view of hell as everlasting conscious punishment cannot be squared with Scripture and its portrayal of God.

This is often how the argument against everlasting punishment is stated. If the God of the Bible is a God of love, then it does seem contrary to His loving character to say that He will forever punish those who reject Jesus. The obvious problem is eternal conscious punishment.

Whereas it seems reasonable to assume that God would require a certain amount of punishment for the wicked, the idea of the punishment lasting forever seems cruel and vindictive. This is why some people choose to believe the wicked will someday be annihilated.

While this line of argumentation has convinced many of its truthfulness, this is not what the Bible says about this subject. God is indeed a God of love, but that is not the end of the story. The God of Scripture is also a Holy God, and a God of justice. Love is not the only attribute, or characteristic, that He possesses.

Furthermore, the Bible makes it clear that He is a God who gets righteously angry at sin. Therefore, ongoing punishment against the unbeliever for all eternity is not inconsistent with God's character as revealed in Scripture.

In addition, the eternal fate of the wicked is a matter in which humans are not qualified to decide. Sinful humanity has sinned against God. He is the One who will decide their fate, and He has said that they must be punished eternally while still in a conscious state.

Furthermore, the God of the Bible, the God of love, has stated that He Himself has created hell for the devil and his angels! Hell is a creation of the loving God! The Lord has also clearly stated that the wicked will also be sent to that same hell.

There is one final point which needs to be emphasized. Those who end up in hell actually send themselves there. God has done everything He can to keep them from this awful fate. However, what He will not do is violate their ability to choose. The Lord has given us the freedom to determine our own destiny, heaven or hell.

Thus, the fact that He is a God of love does not rule out the possibility of Him eternally punishing the wicked for rejecting His offer of forgiveness of sins. As we have seen, the Scripture says that this is exactly what He intends to do.

Question 30

If Hell Is Eternal, Then Would Not Evil Always Exist In The Universe?

The Bible says that God created a place for the devil and his angels called the “lake of fire,” or “hell.” However, there is an apparent problem if hell continues to exist forever. The new universe would not be entirely good but rather it would consist of both good and evil. This does not fit with the perfect universe to which the Bible looks forward.

1. The Restoration Of All Things

For one thing, the Bible predicts a time when all things will be restored. We read the following:

Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:21 NIV).

If “all things” are going to be restored, it is argued that this must be there can be no evil or wickedness left anywhere in the universe.

2. All Things Will Be Made New When Christ Returns

Indeed, Scripture speaks of a day when everything is made new. Paradise lost will be paradise regained. We read the following description in the Book of Revelation:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true (Revelation 21:1-5 NIV).

There are many similar passages which emphasize the perfect future state of the universe.

How then can the new world be perfect if there are people suffering in an eternal hell? It does not seem logical.

Consequently, it would seem more consistent to understand hell as referring to the destruction, or annihilation, of the wicked. Thus, goes the argument.

Response To The Claim That Evil Must Be Totally Eradicated In The New Universe

While this argument seems logical on the face of it, there are a number of things which must be taken into consideration. They are as follows.

First, the fact that there is perfection in God's presence in the new heavens and new earth does not preclude the possibility of some place in the universe where evil beings are housed. Indeed, even if hell was not eternal for human beings, almost everyone agrees that the devil and his angels will suffer eternally. If this is admitted, then this argument falls to the ground.

Furthermore, in the same passages which speak of the perfection of the new world, there is the testimony that unbelievers still exist "outside of the Holy City."

We read about this in the Book of Revelation:

But the cowards, unbelievers, vile, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars—their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death . . . Let the unrighteous go on in unrighteousness; let the filthy go on being made filthy; let the righteous go on in righteousness; and let the holy go on being made holy . . . Outside [the holy city] are the dogs, the sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying (Revelation 21:8; 22:11,15 CSB).

After the Great White Throne Judgment, when all unbelievers are thrown into the lake of fire, and then the Lord forms a new heaven and new earth, we find there are evil people who still exist!

According to this passage, they will remain sinful but they will exist outside of the Holy City apart from the righteous. The wicked will never have any contact with the believers, but they will still exist in a perfect universe.

Therefore, the Bible itself testifies that the future world, a world of perfection, will be a world where the wicked still exist. Consequently, the existence of these sinful people does not mar the perfection of this new world.

We should also note that these unbelievers do "exist" outside of the Holy City, it is not merely their corpses or their ashes that are outside of the New Jerusalem.

In other words, they have not been annihilated, neither will they ever be allowed into the presence of the Lord.

There Is No Challenge To God From Unbelievers

There is something else which needs to be considered. This biblical scenario does not pose any threat to God, or to the believers. Those in hell are not actively opposing God. As mentioned, they would have no contact

with the righteous. They present no challenge to God or His righteous rule over the universe.

Consequently, their existence is irrelevant to those who are in God's presence. It is as though they did not exist.

We thus conclude that the idea of an eternal hell does not contradict what the Bible has to say about God doing away with evil. There will be no evil in His presence. This is what the Scripture emphasizes.

Therefore, it is not necessary, according to Scripture, that all evil be done away with in God's new universe. Hell will always exist.

Summary To Question 30
If Hell Is Eternal, Then Would Not Evil
Always Exist In The Universe?

The Bible says that hell, the lake of fire, the place of final punishment, is eternal in duration. It will exist forever. Yet, if such a place as an everlasting hell exists, then this means that evil will never be done away with.

But how can the Bible speak of God ruling a perfect universe if evil people are still being punished in hell? How can all things be made new? There would seemingly be imperfection in the universe. Consequently, it is contended, the wicked must be annihilated for the universe to be cleansed of all evil. All traces of them must be gone.

This argument is used by annihilationists to insist that hell must not be an eternal place of punishment. Otherwise, we will always have good and evil forever existing in the universe. Therefore, it is reasoned that hell, the lake of fire, must one day cease to exist for the new heaven and new earth to be the perfect place the Scripture speaks about.

While this objection is sometimes raised, it is not that difficult to answer. Indeed, there are a number of things which we can say.

For one thing, the same passages which speak of a future perfect world also speak of the existence of unbelievers. However, these unbelievers are contained in place which is far removed from the righteous. The universe can still be considered perfect and cleansed by God even though there is a place where the unrighteous are being punished.

Almost everyone admits that the devil and his angels will be punished eternally. Once this is conceded then this argument loses all its force. As long as they still exist in some place of punishment, then there will be evil in the universe. End of discussion.

We also find that Scripture speaks of people being "outside" of the Holy City after the Last Judgment where every unbeliever is thrown into the lake of fire. In other words, they are not annihilated. It is not their ashes or corpses that are outside.

Those who in hell are forever separated from the presence of God and the righteous believers. There is no contact between the righteous and the unrighteous. While there are evil people still existing in the universe, these people are never seen by the righteous. As far as the righteous are concerned, they do not exist.

We must also remember that these evil beings are restricted to the place of punishment. There is no possibility of evil angels, or evil humans, escaping the punishment they have received and then causing havoc on the righteous.

Consequently, we would not find any active opposition to the work of God in the new heavens and new earth. Since these unbelievers are not a threat or a challenge to God, they should not be seen as offering an alternative to the God of the Bible. In fact, they do not, and they cannot. They are forever confined to this place of punishment.

Therefore, while evil people will exist in the eternal realm, they will exist in a place which is forever separated from the righteous. Evil will be eradicated in the new world as the Bible says. The fact that unbelievers are being punished for their unbelief does not contradict this.

Question 31

Since The Bible Says That God Wants Nobody To Be Condemned Does It Logically Follow That An Eternal Hell Cannot Exist?

Scripture says that the Lord wishes none to perish but that everyone should come to repentance. Peter wrote about this desire of the Lord:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9 NIV).

Consequently, one of the reasons as to why the Lord is patient with us is that He desires each and every human being to come to a place of repentance.

Paul wrote something similar to Timothy. He said that it is God's desire that all people should be saved:

This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:3-5 ESV).

These passages make it clear that God desires that all humanity would come to know Him.

Does This Mean That Nobody Will Ever Perish?

These passages have caused some annihilationists to make the following argument. If the God of the Bible says that He does not want anyone to perish, then nobody will perish. God always gets everything which He desires, and His desire is that nobody should ever perish. Therefore, it stands to reason that nobody will perish.

The Lord also says He wants everyone to be saved therefore, everyone will be saved. Hence, the logical conclusion is that the idea of a place where there is eternal conscious suffering for the wicked is contrary to God's specific wishes. End of argument.

This Same Argument Is Used By Universalists

We also find these same passages are used by universalists, but they come to a different conclusion. They believe these passages teach that everyone will one day end up in heaven! Not only does a place of everlasting punishment, or hell, not exist, every person will eventually be saved because this is God's expressed will.

Therefore, to them, these passages testify to a day when everyone will be made right with God. This includes the very worst of sinners who have ever lived. Hell will one day be unoccupied.

Response: God's Will Is Used In Different Senses

While this argument is often used to refute the idea of eternal punishment for the wicked, or the idea that everyone will one day end up in heaven, it does not really do this. To begin with, it incorrectly assumes that when the Bible is speaking of God's will, it is always referring to it in exactly the same sense. A simple study of Scripture will show that this is not the case.

Indeed, the Bible says there were a number of situations in which God allowed people to do certain things when He expressly said He did not wish them to do it.

We can give a specific example. Jesus stated that God did not desire, or wish, that anyone be divorced. We read of Jesus' response in Matthew to a question about divorce:

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” (Matthew 19:8 NIV).

The Contemporary English Version puts it this way:

Jesus replied, “You are so heartless! That’s why Moses allowed you to divorce your wife. But from the beginning God did not intend it to be that way” (Matthew 19:8 CEV).

While God certainly did not will for anyone to be divorced, divorce was permitted by Him. This is a case of God allowing something to take place which He did not really wish to occur. Yet, He permitted it. Other examples could be given, but the point should be clear.

Of course, if God has determined something is going to happen, then it will happen. No force in the universe can stop the Lord from carrying out that which He determines to carry out. Nobody doubts this. But this is not the issue here.

Sometimes The Ultimate Decision Is Left With Us

The Bible says that there are situations where God wills or desires something to happen but that He has left the ultimate decision to us. In these instances the responsibility becomes ours. This is the situation with those who reject Jesus Christ. They actually send themselves to hell by their rejection of the forgiveness which Christ offers.

Certainly the Lord does not wish for this to happen but in this instance the ultimate choice is ours, not His. He has given us that freedom to determine our own destiny.

Therefore, nobody should use the argument of God's desire for everyone to be saved as evidence that everlasting punishment of the wicked does not occur. It does.

Summary To Question 31
Since The Bible Says That God Wants Nobody
To Be Condemned Does It Logically Follow That
An Eternal Hell Cannot Exist?

Peter records the Lord as saying that it is His sincere desire that nobody should perish, but that all should come to a place of repentance. In the same manner, Paul wrote to Timothy and said that God wills or wishes for everyone to be saved.

If the God of the Bible wishes for everyone to come to know Him, and God gets everything that He wishes, then it is logical to conclude that everyone will eventually be saved. In other words, nobody will spend eternity in hell, for God will save them from this outcome.

Some people go even further than this. They also conclude from these statements that everyone will actually end up in heaven. This is the belief of the doctrine of universalism.

Annihilationists do not go this far. They reject the doctrine of universalism; that everyone will someday enter heaven. They merely conclude from these passages that an eternal hell must not exist. Indeed, if God does not want anyone to perish, then the idea of some type of eternal conscious suffering for anyone is impossible.

This argument will not stand because it misses a simple truth. The Bible makes a distinction between that which God desires to happen, and what He wills, or decrees, must happen. Scripture never says that the Lord has decreed that everyone to be saved. Rather it says that He desires this to happen. He demonstrated His desire for this outcome by sending Jesus Christ to die for the sins of the world.

However, the Lord has also given human beings a genuine choice in the matter of their eternal destinies. Basically, we have our eternal fate in our own hands, it is up to us. We can willingly choose to believe in Him or we can willingly choose to reject Him.

While it is His desire is that everyone comes to believe in Christ as Savior, God has made it clear that He will not interfere with our capacity to personally choose our destiny. The choice is ours.

Consequently, the fact that the Lord wants nobody to perish, but rather He wishes that every human being come to believe in Him, does not mean this will happen. Certain people will choose not to believe. The fact that God has plainly spoken of an eternal place of punishment for unbelievers makes this point abundantly clear.

Question 32

How Can Anyone Justly Be Sent To An Eternal Hell If God Has Predetermined Their Fate?

There is a huge objection made by some who reject the historical view of everlasting punishment for the wicked. This concerns the matter of God pre-determining the fate of everyone. If the God of the Bible has pre-determined or predestined certain persons to eternal suffering, then how can He be called a God of love, a God who is righteous, or a God who is fair?

Indeed, if those who are predestined for hell do not even have the theoretical possibility of believing in Jesus Christ, yet they will be condemned to hell for rejecting Him, how can this be considered just or fair in any sense of the word? God, it seems, would be condemning people for something they had no control over.

Some Believe God Has Pre-determined The Fate Of The Wicked

Moreover, there are a number of Bible-believing Christians who hold this point of view. They do believe that God has predetermined that countless people will suffer in an eternal hell because of their refusal to accept Jesus, a refusal they were pre-determined to make. They believe that this is what the Scripture teaches.

How Is It Justified?

How then do they deal with the problem of God's fairness? They usually answer this objection in a number of ways.

1. He Is The Creator, We Should Not Argue With Him

Often, the answer consists of statements such as God can do whatever He wishes to do. Since He is God, He has the right to punish people who have sinned against Him. Sometimes a passage, such as the following, is cited:

Destruction is certain for those who argue with their Creator. Does a clay pot ever argue with its maker? Does the clay dispute with the one who shapes it, saying, ‘Stop, you are doing it wrong?’ Does the pot exclaim, ‘How clumsy can you be?’ (Isaiah 45:9 NLT).

He is the Maker; we are but His creation. Who are we to argue with Him?

2. Some Plead Ignorance

Sometimes those who hold this position plead ignorance. They say they do not understand why this is so, only that it is so. Who can know the mind of the Lord? Sometimes these verses are cited in Isaiah are cited:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8,9 NIV).

God works in ways unknown to us. We should not question how He works.

3. We Should Be Thankful He Saves Some People

What is usually emphasized is not the fact that God will send certain people to hell, but rather that we should be thankful that He is gracious enough to allow anyone to heaven. This, it is contended, is the correct way to look at this. All of us deserve hell. The fact that any are saved should be a cause for rejoicing.

Not All People Who Believe In Everlasting Punishment Accept This Doctrine

If this was what the Bible taught about the reason why the wicked are sent to hell, then there would be enormous problems. However, the answer to this objection is simple; this is not what the Bible teaches. Many Bible-believing Christians, who accept the idea of the everlasting punishment of the wicked, do *not* believe everyone has had their destiny pre-determined before they were even born.

We Have A Choice In The Matter

Indeed, the Scripture says that all of us have a choice. From the first page of the Bible until the last, the Scripture emphasizes that people have willingly chosen to reject the Lord’s truth.

For example, when Jesus pronounced judgment upon the city of Jerusalem, He said the following:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the prophets and stone to death those sent to you! How often I wanted to gather your children together the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings! But you were not willing! Your house will be abandoned, deserted (Matthew 23:37,38 God’s Word).

Notice that the people of Jerusalem rejected Jesus out of their own free will. Indeed, Christ wanted to gather the people to Himself but they were not willing to believe either Him or His prophets. To the point, they had a legitimate choice, in the matter. Thus, by willfully rejecting Him, they had actually condemned themselves!

Examples like this could be multiplied from the Scripture. Consequently, it is incorrect to say that God has predetermined the fate of the wicked before they were born. People do indeed have choice and are going to be held responsible for the choices they make.

While there are Christians who believe this idea of God pre-determining the destiny of the lost, this is not what the Bible teaches on the subject. Therefore, this particular objection, to the historical doctrine of hell, fails.

Summary To Question 32

How Can Anyone Justly Be Sent To An Eternal Hell If God Has Predetermined Their Fate?

Some people contend that God has unfairly predetermined the fate of the wicked. They point to the belief of some Christians that the Lord has fixed the destiny of every human being before any of us have been born. Therefore, we have no legitimate choice whether to believe or not to believe. Genuine Christians must believe because they are the ones chosen, and the lost must be forever lost because they are not part of the ones chosen, the elect. Nobody really has a choice.

Consequently, it is asked how the lost can be held responsible for not believing in Jesus since, by definition, they were not able to believe? This seems grossly unfair and contrary to the righteous character of God which is revealed in Scripture. This would make Him an unjust Judge, something He clearly is not.

There are a number of Bible-believing Christians who do indeed believe that God has predetermined the destiny of everyone before the world was created. They assume every choice has been made by God, not by us. Therefore, the fate of everyone has been determined before we were even born. Indeed, it was made before the world was created.

They usually give a number of explanations as to why this is so. To begin with, God is God, and He can do whatever He wants. We should not argue with Him. This is certainly true, but that does not mean that this is what He did do. That has to be proven, not merely assumed.

Others say this is a mystery. Consequently, we cannot know why this is so. Therefore, they plead ignorance. Yet again, the burden of proof is on those who say that the Lord has predetermined the fate of everyone.

Often this objection is turned around. We are told that we should be thankful that the Lord saves anyone because this is something He did not have to do. Therefore, we should not complain about others being lost. We should give thanks that some are saved.

However, these explanations do not satisfy many Bible-believers. Indeed, they do not accept that this is what the Bible teaches on the subject. On the contrary, they believe that everyone makes their own decision. People go to hell because they choose to go there. God has not made this choice for them.

As we search the Scripture, it becomes abundantly clear that the Lord continually asks people to make choices. It is always assumed that these people have a real choice to make. Nowhere do we get the impression that humans are like puppets with the Lord pulling the strings.

In fact, in Jesus' lament over the city of Jerusalem for rejecting Him, He stated how often He wanted to gather them, but they were not willing. In other words, they had a choice, and they chose to reject Him. This is certainly inconsistent with any idea of the Lord programming all things ahead of time.

Consequently, not everyone who believes in the everlasting punishment of the unrighteous holds to the idea that God has predetermined those who will believe in Him, and those who will reject Him. People have choice and unfortunately many of them will willingly choose not to believe. This is what the Bible teaches on the subject.

Question 33

Does Jesus' Story Of The Rich Man And Lazarus Give Evidence For The Ultimate Annihilation Of The Wicked?

The Christians who believe that hell is a place of everlasting punishment for the wicked sometimes illustrate this belief with Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31).

The Rich Man Was Conscious

In His story, Jesus had the rich man in place of conscious torment in the next world. In fact, the man emphasized that he was in “agony in this flame.” Luke records Jesus saying the following:

In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment (Luke 16:23-28 NIV).

The setting of this story of Jesus is the intermediate, or in-between state of the dead. In the future, all the dead will be raised, and then judged. The wicked will be punished. Since the rich man's brothers were still living on earth in this story, the final judgment had not occurred.

Thus, this account deals with things that take place in the in-between state, the time between this life and the final judgment.

In this story, the man was obviously in pain. He testified that he was in agony in this fiery punishment he was experiencing. Yet the fire, while tormenting him, did not consume him.

This account provides further evidence of the conditions of hell, even though this punishment takes place in the intermediate, or in-between state of the dead. For one thing, the rich man died and then went immediately to this place of torment in the unseen realm of the dead. His ongoing punishment began the moment he passed on from this world.

In the same manner, the people who end up going to hell, will be punished by means of fire, and as in this illustration, the fire will not consume them.

To sum up, this account confirms that the wicked dead do not go out of existence but rather immediately go to a place of punishment. In this

temporary place they are waiting for their resurrection, which will be followed by their appearance before God, the righteous Judge, and then their sentence, everlasting punishment.

Annihilationists Object To Using This Story

Those who hold to annihilationist position object to this story as an indication of what conditions will be like for all eternity.

1. This Refers To The Intermediate State Not The Final State

They correctly point out that this story refers to the intermediate state of the dead. In other words, the final judgment of the wicked, as well as the punishment, has not yet happened. Therefore, it does not specifically refer to the final state of the wicked. Consequently, conclusions should not be drawn.

Some contend that before the final judgment, the unbeliever may indeed suffer some sort of punishment. They will suffer, but there will come a time when this suffering ends.

Therefore, this passage has nothing to do with the eternal state of the wicked.

2. The Story Is A Parable: Not A True Account Of What Occurred

It is also contended that this story is a parable. Therefore, it is not meant to provide for us the exact conditions which exist in the next world. Indeed, Jesus' story was for the purpose of illustrating the futility of having riches in this life alone. His point was that riches in this life cannot help anyone in the next life.

Consequently, we must be careful not to draw any conclusions from this parable which is not meant to be understood literally, and it is not specifically intended to deal with the afterlife. Thus, we must not assume there is a literal flame in hell which does not consume the person who is being burned.

Response To The Claim Of Annihilationists

There are a number of things which need to be addressed in response to these claims of annihilationists. They are as follows.

The Same Conditions In Hell Are Taught Elsewhere

To begin with, Jesus' story in Luke is consistent with other passages of Scripture which speak of conditions in hell. In other words, it supports what we already know about life in the next world. We do not merely get all of our information on hell from this passage.

For example, Jesus elsewhere spoke of conscious suffering for those who rejected Him. Matthew records Him saying the following:

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 (Matthew 25:41 ESV).

The lost will be banished to a place of eternal fire, like the fire spoken of in Jesus' story. Thus, the story in Luke reinforces what we read here.

In the Book of Revelation, we are told of the fate of the beast, the final Antichrist, and the false prophet. John recorded it as follows:

But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 19:20 NIV).

Like the rich man in Jesus' story, these personages are tormented with fire. They are cast into the lake of fire while still living. There is no indication whatsoever that the fire consumes them. They are burned while alive but somehow, in some unexplained way, they are not consumed.

In fact, that we find that they are still alive in this lake of fire one thousand years later! The Bible says:

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented there day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 NET).

Therefore, the details in Jesus' story provide us with a consistent description of the afterlife when compared with other passages of Scripture.

The Story Of Jesus Is Not Necessarily A Parable

While many Bible students believe this story of Jesus is a parable, not all agree. Indeed, there are a number of reasons as to why this story may be a true account of two people who once lived.

For one thing, the story is not about this world, but the next. All of Jesus' parables dealt with this life. If this is a parable, it would be the only one dealing with the next world.

In addition, a person is named in this story, Lazarus. If this is a parable, it is the only one where a character is given a name. Nowhere else do we find anyone specifically named in the other parables of Jesus.

Furthermore, the rich man in the story is said to have had five brothers still living. These details may signal an actual historical situation rather than a mere parable.

The Details Were Given For A Reason

Even if the story is considered to be a parable, we still must examine exactly everything what Jesus taught. Furthermore, even if the main point of the story was to show the fallacy of trusting in riches in this life, the fact that He gave a number of details about conditions in the afterlife cannot be ignored. They must mean something.

Indeed, there is one point about this which we cannot overemphasize: Jesus did not give us this parable, with all its details, to mislead us about the state of the wicked in the afterlife! That we know for certain.

Whatever the case may be, we can at the very least say that the story of the rich man and Lazarus is consistent with the remainder of Scripture in its description of the afterlife. It is a place of conscious punishment for the lost where the person is suffering in some sort of fire or flame. It is not a place where they are ultimately annihilated or incinerated.

Summary To Question 33

Does Jesus' Story Of The Rich Man And Lazarus Give Evidence For The Ultimate Annihilation Of The Wicked?

One line of evidence, which is frequently used to show that hell consists of the eternal conscious punishment for the wicked, is found in a particular story given by Jesus. Christ told of the fate of two people who had died. One was an unnamed rich man, and the other was a poor man named Lazarus. In the next world, the rich man was in conscious torment, suffering in flames, while Lazarus was being comforted in the arms of Abraham. He was in a place of complete happiness and bliss.

This story is used by many to illustrate that the wicked do not go out of existence but rather they are consciously punished in the afterlife immediately after death. The rich man was suffering in the flames, but he was not consumed by the fire. This confirms that the eternal state will consist of conscious punishment without any extinction or annihilation of the wicked. At the very least, it illustrates that flames do not have to consume someone in the next world when the Lord punishes them.

Annihilationists deny this. They say that this story of Jesus should not be used to determine the ultimate fate of the wicked for a number of reasons.

To begin with, Jesus' story is about the intermediate state, it is not about the eternal state. It is not dealing with the subject of hell. The final judgment has not happened yet. It is only after the Last Judgment that the wicked are punished, by annihilation.

Consequently, this story is not even dealing with the ultimate destiny of the wicked. The only thing that may possibly be inferred from this story is that

the wicked are presently suffering. However, it says nothing about what will happen to them after they appear before the Lord at the final judgment.

Also, we are dealing with a parable. The main point of this parable is not the eternal fate of the righteous or the wicked, but rather it deals with the subject of wealth and how it should be properly used.

Therefore, we should be cautious as to how much information we should attempt to obtain from this story. This is especially true if the main purpose of Jesus' story is not to teach us about the afterlife, but rather about the misuse of riches.

In response, it is admitted that Jesus is speaking of the intermediate state. However, this does not lead to the conclusions which are assumed by annihilationists.

First, we should not suppose that the situation will be any different for the wicked in the eternal state than it presently is in the intermediate state.

Indeed, in Jesus' story, the rich man is given no hope of escaping his fate. There is nothing that indicates his suffering is somehow limited and that someday he will merely cease to exist. On the contrary, a simple reading of the passage indicates that his destiny has been sealed for all eternity. He has no hope because he is in a place of no hope.

There is something else. It is not entirely certain that this is merely a parable. Many people argue that this could, in fact, be a true account of the destiny of two actual people.

Contrary to all Jesus' parables, this story is about the afterlife, not about this life. In addition, a person is named in this account, Lazarus. These facts, along with others, have led many to assume we are dealing with something which actually took place, rather than the story being a mere parable. However, even if one insists that this is a parable dealing with the proper use of riches, it does not follow that we should pay no attention to the explicit details which Jesus gives us about the afterlife. There is a reason as to why Jesus provided these details. This should not be minimized.

Furthermore, as we closely compare with what Jesus said of the afterlife in this story, we find that it is consistent with the teaching of other parts of Scripture about the next world. There is punishment by fire but the fire does not consume the one being punished. Accordingly, this account confirms what other parts of Scripture are saying about the afterlife. We do not derive our information about hell merely because of this story.

In sum, we conclude that it is proper to use this story of Jesus to reinforce certain truths about the afterlife that are taught elsewhere. Whatever the case may be, this we do know for certain: the Lord did not have this account recorded in Scripture so as to mislead us about the fate of the wicked in the afterlife! Everything in the Bible, including the details in this account, are there for a purpose.

Question 34

Does God's Justice Demand That The Wicked Must Be Annihilated Someday? (The Proportionality Argument, The Punishment Must Fit The Crime)

One of the consistent points which is made from the annihilationist perspective is that it is unthinkable for God to eternally punish finite sins committed by finite human beings. They insist that eternal conscious torment is incompatible with the revealed character of the God of the Bible, for the punishment must fit the crime!

Furthermore, they believe their view of the eventual extinction of the wicked gives them a superior way of defending God's justice in an evil universe. Indeed, after God's judgment and annihilation of the wicked, there will be no more evil anywhere in the universe. This is in contrast to the historical view which says evil will always exist in some corner of the universe where the unrighteous are punished for all eternity.

Consequently, those who argue that the Scripture teaches the eventual annihilation of the wicked say that the justice of God actually demands that this happens. In fact, when we consider what the Bible has to say about the character of God, this is the only thing which could reasonably happen, the wicked must cease to exist. The argument goes as follows.

1. Eternal Suffering Is Not Consistent With God's Justice

The Bible teaches that God will judge people according to what they have done in this life. We read about this in the Book of Revelation:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books (Revelation 20:12 NIV).

This verse implies that the penalty which God will place on each individual will be in direct correspondence with the evil deeds they have done. In other words, the punishment will fit the crimes committed in this life. Since eternal conscious torment is out of proportion to any sins committed in time, it cannot be the ultimate fate of the wicked. God's justice demands that the suffering must be equivalent with the sin committed. Therefore, the wicked must eventually be made to be extinct.

2. Finite Humans Cannot Commit Infinite Sins

It is also contended that a finite, a limited human being, cannot commit an infinite sin. Consequently, there should not be infinite punishment for finite sin. This remains true even if the sin is committed against an infinite God.

3. What Would Be The Purpose Everlasting Punishment?

There is also the issue of the purpose of God's punishment. Why would the Lord subject any person, no matter how wicked, to everlasting conscious punishment? It has been argued that the unending punishment of the wicked would serve no imaginable purpose. God certainly would not punish the wicked for all eternity out of sheer revenge and spite.

Since hell is never spoken of as a place where the wicked people are reformed, it can only be a place of punishment. Thus, once the punishment is meted out, the individual is then annihilated.

4. How Could Saints Be Joyful Knowing The Lost Are Suffering?

There is also the issue of the joyful experience of the believers in heaven. How could they possibly be joyful in heaven when they recognize that there are countless people suffering in hell? Since they will not be ignorant that such a place exists, how could they carry on worshipping the Lord and enjoying His presence, when innumerable people, including some of their friends and loved ones, are forever in a place of conscious torment? This does not seem possible.

These points have convinced a number of people that annihilation is a much better answer to the question of the fate of the wicked. In fact, to many, it seems like the only option given what the Bible has to say about the character of God. Indeed, the righteous and unrighteous cannot coexist eternally in any meaningful sense.

In sum, Bible-believing annihilationists contend that their view is superior in a number of ways to the historical view, especially in this particular question. In fact, they assert that the belief of eternal conscious punishment violates the principle of proportionality, the punishment must fit the crime.

Response To The Idea That The Wicked Must Be Annihilated

This particular objection, which is often brought up by annihilationists, does not really make their case as they suppose. When we consider what the Scriptures teach about the justice of God, we find that the historical view of hell is consistent with everything the Lord has revealed. We respond as follows.

1. The Illustration Of The One Sin Of Adam

There are a number of biblical examples which demonstrate God's complete hatred of sin. There is no doubt about this. Sin is an affront to God and the Scripture records numerous examples of the Lord punishing sin.

Yet, in some cases, the punishment exacted by the Lord may seem to be beyond what is called for. The prime example of this is the original disobedience of Adam and Eve and the judgment they, as well as the rest

of us, received. According to Scripture, their one act of rebellion brought sin into the world. The Apostle Paul explained it this way:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—(Romans 5:12 ESV).

A few verses later, Paul added some further details about the consequences of the sin of Adam:

And what a difference between our sin and God's generous gift of forgiveness. For this one man, Adam, brought death to many through his sin. But this other man, Jesus Christ, brought forgiveness to many through God's bountiful gift. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but we have the free gift of being accepted by God, even though we are guilty of many sins. The sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over us, but all who receive God's wonderful, gracious gift of righteousness will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:15–17 NLT).

Therefore, the Bible clearly teaches that when Adam committed the one act of sin by eating the forbidden fruit, he set the future course for the entire human race. All of us were condemned to be born with a sinful nature, and we all will have to suffer the terrible consequences of his original sin. This includes physical death. All of this is a result of the *one* sin of Adam. Paul then further explains the result of Adam's sin:

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (Romans 5:18 NIV).

Therefore, we find the entire world is condemned to live with sin because one man and one woman ate a piece of fruit. From a human perspective, it may seem like an overreaction or an unjust penalty for such a small crime. Yet from God's viewpoint this act of disobedience was something horrific, and thus deserved a suitable penalty.

2. The Judgment Was Not Out Of Proportion To The Sinful Act

According to God's perspective, this penalty is not out of proportion to the crime committed. The Apostle Paul repeatedly said that Adam's one sin brought death and condemnation to all humanity.

There is no doubt about this. Adam's sin brought physical death to each human, caused every human to be born spiritually separated from God, and will result in eternal separation from the Lord for the wicked. All of this came to the human race as a result of Adam's one sin.

3. God Had Warned Adam Of The Consequences

Was God unjust for placing this penalty on the entire human race? Did the punishment fit the crime? The Bible says that He told Adam what would happen if he ate from the forbidden tree. Indeed, Adam was told that he would surely die. Scripture records the warning:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die (Genesis 2:17 ESV).

The choice was clear and the punishment was also made clear. Disobedience would result in death. Adam knew the consequences.

4. God's Verdict Must Be Understood

God's evaluation of the situation is made clear by the Apostle Paul. He wrote.

There is a lot of difference between Adam's sin and God's gift. That one sin led to punishment. But God's gift made it possible for us to be acceptable to him, even though we have sinned many times (Romans 5:16 CEV).

It was "one sin" which brought the judgment, as well as punishment, to the entire human race. If we are to submit to the authority of God's Word, then we must accept the fact that God is not unjust for punishing the human race for Adam's solitary sin. He believed the punishment fit the crime.

The point is this. Our view of divine justice must come from the Scripture alone. We must humbly submit ourselves to the teachings of the Bible, the Word of God. Whatever punishment God deems necessary for sin, that particular punishment is just, and it is fair. There is no injustice with God. None.

5. We Need God's Viewpoint On The Matter

Therefore, those who protest that God would be unfair in sending wicked people to an eternal hell do not have God's mind on this issue. He determines what is just and unjust, it is not our decision. We must accept His verdict.

Therefore, if we do not protest against past divine punishments which the Scripture records, then why should we assume we have the right to protest any future punishments? Who do we think we are?

The teaching of Scripture regarding the fate of the lost is indeed frightful. Nobody denies this. They will suffer a terrible eternity for their unbelief. However, this is God's righteous punishment for their sin against Him. The Lord says that it is a fair punishment. This is His viewpoint, and it should be ours also.

6. Some Acts Call For Greater Punishment

We can illustrate this as follows. We all understand that some acts call for greater punishment than other acts. If someone kills the leader of a country, a president, a king, or a prime minister, it is considered a greater crime than the killing of a private citizen of that country. We all recognize this. Some crimes are greater than others.

In the case of the human race sinning against God, we must understand the gravity of the crime. All of us have sinned against the God of the universe, the Creator. Therefore, the punishment for that sin should be in proportion to the One sinned against. God says that judgment is an eternal hell, endless conscious punishment.

Again, who are we to argue? God is the One who makes the rules and sets the penalties. He punished the entire human race for the sin of Adam, and He says that He will forever punish the wicked, if they reject Jesus Christ and His offer of forgiveness. The Lord was righteous in placing this punishment upon Adam, and He is righteous in placing this punishment upon the lost.

Furthermore, it does no good to compare sins committed in this world against humans, with sins committed against the Lord. This is not an equal comparison. God is infinite, we are finite. God is the Creator, we are the creation. God has provided everything for us, we provide nothing.

While some contend that no sin or combination of sins could be infinite, they do not have God's mind on this issue. In this case, what must be measured is the effect of the sin. While it may seem to some to be out of all proportion to the act, this is not how God views it.

Therefore, we should not protest against God's justice or righteousness on the basis of what seems fair or unfair to us. Instead, we must adjust our thinking to His thinking. It is only then that we will have the correct perspective of sin, judgment and punishment.

Summary To Question 34 Does God's Justice Demand That The Wicked Must Be Annihilated Someday? (The Proportionality Argument, The Punishment Must Fit The Crime)

One of the main objections to the idea of the eternal punishment of the wicked concerns the fairness of the punishment the Bible describes. It can be simply stated as follows. God is a righteous God, a just God. The Bible stresses that He is always fair in His dealings with humanity. The Bible also says that God punishes those who sin.

However, the punishment always fits the crime. In other words, God's punishment of the wicked is always in direct proportion to the sin which people have committed. It is no more, and no less. This is the biblical teaching on the subject.

Since, this fact is beyond any doubt, many people conclude that the idea of an everlasting punishment for the wicked could not even be possible. There does not seem to be any conceivable way to justify eternal punishment for sins committed in this life, no matter how terrible the sin may be.

Thus, we are forced to conclude that when the Bible speaks about hell, it is talking about annihilating the wicked. It does not mean that they will be subject to eternal conscious punishment in hell.

This objection to the idea of everlasting punishment, while popular, does not fit the facts for a number of reasons.

First, we settle the question of the existence of an eternal hell on the teaching of Scripture. We do not do it on the basis of what we think may, or may not, be fair. The One who decides what is fair is God. He alone makes the decision. Therefore, the only voice that counts in this matter is the voice of God. What does He say about it?

As far as the punishment fitting the crime, we can point to the one act of Adam, which the Bible says brought sin into the world. All of the misery that the world has experienced since its beginning can be attributed to this one act of disobedience by the first couple, Adam and Eve.

While one may think the punishment for this one solitary act of rebellion is extreme, this is not what the Bible has to say. God makes it clear that the entire human race has justly suffered the consequences of the first sin. The punishment has fit the crime.

This being the case, we need to discover God's view of sin before we can say that eternal punishment is an impossibility. The Bible makes it clear that all sin is ultimately against God. It is an attack on His holy and perfect character.

Consequently, the magnitude of the punishment matches the magnitude of the sin. The penalty is punishment without end. This is God's verdict on the matter, and His is the only opinion that counts.

Question 35

Do Biblical Descriptions Such As Fire, Death, And Separation Indicate Annihilation Of The Wicked Rather Than Eternal Punishment?

Those who argue that the Scripture teaches the eventual annihilation of the wicked use three biblical terms, fire, death, and separation, to indicate that unbelievers will eventually cease to exist. They contend that these words, when they are properly interpreted, will lead people to believe in the ultimate annihilation of the wicked, not their everlasting punishment.

Add to this, the term “destruction” is also used to advocate the eventual annihilation of the wicked. Since this particular term, as well as many similar words which are related to it, are often used to support the case for annihilationism, we will devote the next question looking at the evidence pro and con from the biblical words translated destroy and destruction.

The arguments for annihilationism based upon these three terms can be listed as follows.

1. Fire Incinerates, It Does Not Eternally Punish

Historically Christians have believed that the references to fire in hell means the wicked dead are eternally punished in the flames of judgment. However, this fire will never consume them. The fire never goes out and the person never perishes.

However, those holding to the ultimate annihilation of the lost argue that the main purpose of fire is not to cause pain, but to incinerate. It burns up, it destroys. This is the proper understanding of the image. Any inflicting of pain is only temporary at best. Fire consumes and destroys. Nothing is left.

Since fire is used to describe the final state of the wicked, it indicates annihilation; it is not speaking about continual punishment and pain. This is consistent with what the Bible says about the nature of God. He is a “consuming fire.” Therefore, the fire must consume or incinerate that which it is burning.

John the Baptist compared the fate of the wicked to those who are burned with unquenchable fire. Matthew records him saying the following about the coming Messiah:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12 ESV).

This unquenchable fire is understood to mean destruction or extinction. Burning something with fire means that thing will ultimately be consumed. The people who are burned will be incinerated, not tormented forever.

The Example Of Babylon

While the smoke from their punishment rises forever, their punishing does not last forever. An example of this is found in the destruction of the city of Babylon. We read the following in the Book of Revelation:

A second time they said, “Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever (Revelation 19:3 God’s Word).

Note that the smoke goes up from her “forever and ever.” However, we know that the city of Babylon is not going to burn forever and ever. Indeed, we are told that the city will be destroyed before the Lord returns:

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said: “With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again” (Revelation 18:21 NIV).

This shows that the fire has accomplished its purpose. It has burned up, or incinerated, what was placed into it but the fire does not burn forever.

The Branches Are Burned

John wrote of these people being thrown away as a worthless branch and then burned. He records Jesus as saying the following:

If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown out like a branch, and dries up; and such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, and are burned up (John 15:6 CSB).

According to annihilationists, this is another way of describing what happens to the wicked. These branches will be burned. Burn means to incinerate, not to punish consciously.

2. Death Means Cease To Exist

The same is true with the Greek word translated “death.” When a person dies their body is lifeless, they cease to function. Thus, when the wicked are judged to hell, they are killed or deprived of all life. They become annihilated, or extinct. In other words, they cease to exist. This is why it is called the “second death.”

Furthermore, the Bible says that the wicked are in the process of perishing, dying. Paul wrote:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18 ESV).

In this verse, Paul contrasts believers and unbelievers. As believers, we are in the process of being saved while unbelievers are in the process of perishing. By definition, the process of perishing, or dying, must come to an end. This only makes sense!

3. Separation Means Unbelievers Are Banned Forever From His Presence

Finally, when the term “separation from God” is found in the New Testament, it is also viewed as a reference to annihilation, not conscious punishment.

On the Day of Judgment, Jesus will tell the false prophets to depart from Him. Matthew records His words as follows:

On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons and do many powerful deeds?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Go away from me, you lawbreakers!’ (Matthew 7:22,23 CSB).

They will depart, or be separated, from Him and the joy of His presence. This says nothing about eternal punishment.

Therefore, those who hold to the doctrine of annihilation see these terms are consistent with the idea that the wicked dead will not suffer eternally but will rather go out of existence at some point in time. Fire, death, and separation are terms which can and should be understood to refer to the wicked being obliterated, not suffering consciously forever in hell.

Response To The Idea That These Words Speak Of Annihilation

At first glance, it may seem that a strong case can be made out for the eventual annihilation of the wicked dead from these biblical terms and the way they are used. Yet there are a couple of things that need to be said at the outset.

Many Of The Passages Have To Do With Physical Death

To begin with, many of the examples that are cited have to do with physical death. In other words, the context is not addressing eternal destinies. Instead these various images are speaking of the fate of the person as far as their earthly life is concerned, nothing more. Consequently, since many of these passages are not dealing with the afterlife, they are not relevant in answering questions about the destiny of the wicked.

Understanding The Meaning Of The Terms In Their Context

Not only are many of these passages not speaking of the future state of the wicked, the ones which are addressing this issue are not teaching the doctrine of annihilation of the wicked. We can make the following observations:

1. Fire Does Not Mean Annihilation In The Next World

The use of fire in the punishment of the wicked is a common theme in Scripture, both in this life and in the next. While fire does incinerate, not every instance of fire in the Bible speaks of annihilating its victim.

Two Biblical Examples Of Fire Not Obliterating The Dead

We also have examples in Scripture of those in the realm of the dead being tormented by fire, but not being consumed or annihilated by it.

In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, which takes place in the intermediate state, the state of people who have died but have not yet been judged, we are told that the rich man was consciously suffering in the flame, but he was not annihilated by it:

And being in torment in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off, with Lazarus at his side. ‘Father Abraham!’ he called out, ‘Have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this flame (Luke 16:23,24 CSB).

He was tormented by the flame but was not consumed by it.

In another example, the beast and the false prophet, though cast into the lake of fire at the return of Christ, are still there one thousand years later, and they are alive!

But the beast was taken prisoner, and along with him the false prophet, who had performed the signs in his presence. He deceived those who accepted the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image with these signs. Both of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. ... The Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelation 19:20, 20:10 CSB).

These two examples demonstrate that the fiery punishment in the next world does not consume those who are suffering, it does not happen in the intermediate state, it does not happen in the eternal state.

2. Death Never Means Cease To Exist

The main idea behind death is “separation;” it is never annihilation or extinction. Therefore, when a person is dead, they do not cease to exist. The body dies, but the spirit or soul lives on.

In fact, this is made clear from our previous point. The rich man in Jesus' story, who had died, still existed in the afterlife. He was in torment while the righteous Lazarus was in a blissful state.

Paul would later say the following about those who die having put their faith in Christ:

We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8 NIV).

Death, therefore, though the end of life on this earth, brings us to another destination, a destination where everyone is still very much alive.

The Death Process Only Occurs In This Life

As the Bible says, people are indeed in the process of dying. However, this takes place only in this life. Never are we told that people in the afterlife are in the “process” of perishing, or dying, they are not. In fact, Jesus said that those who believe in Him will never die:

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this (John 11:25 NIV).

Obviously, as He made it clear, the Lord was not talking about physical death. Even though a person is physically dead they are still alive in the next world.

As we just noted, the main idea behind death is separation. A person who is spiritually dead is separated from God. Yet, those who believe in Jesus will never die spiritually because they will never be separated from Him.

With respect to the afterlife, death never has the thought of extinction or the ceasing of a person to exist. Everyone will exist in the next life; however, the unbelievers will be separated from God where they will be consciously punished:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 NIV).

The believers will not perish, the unbelievers will. Right after these words we read the following:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son (John 3:18 NIV)

Those who perish are condemned to judgment, and judgment involves punishment and this punishment is not annihilation or extinction.

3. Separation Does Not Mean Annihilation

Finally, the separation of the wicked from the Lord does not mean their eventual annihilation. They are separated from the blessed presence of God but they are punished in His wrathful presence. We read of this in the Book of Revelation:

And a third angel followed them and spoke with a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, which is mixed full strength in the cup of His anger. He will be

tormented with fire and sulfur in the sight of the holy angels and in the sight of the Lamb” (Revelation 14:9–10 CSB).

These unbelievers remain in the presence of the Lord during their punishment but they are separated from believers who are in His joyful presence.

In His public ministry, Jesus made it clear that the unbelieving religious leaders would not be able to follow Him in the future but would be separated from His presence:

Once more Jesus said to them, “I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come” (John 8:21 NIV).

They will die in their sin and therefore be excluded from the blessed presence of the Lord. Yet this exclusion will not involve annihilation or ceasing to exist. They will indeed exist but it will be away from the blissful presence of the Lord.

They Are Separated For All Eternity

In the Book of Revelation we find that there are people in the eternal realm who exist outside of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. In other words, they are separated from the Lord. First, we have the comparison of the righteous with the unrighteous in the eternal realm.

The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But to the cowards, unbelievers, detestable persons, murderers, the sexually immoral, and those who practice magic spells, idol worshipers, and all those who lie, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur. That is the second death (Revelation 21:7 NET).

The righteous inherit the kingdom, the unrighteous, the lake of fire.

While people from the various nations will be able to enter the Holy City, the unrighteous will not:

But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life (Revelation 21:27 ESV).

We are then told that the unrighteous still exist outside of the gates of the Holy City:

Blessed are those who wash their robes so they can have access to the tree of life and can enter into the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood! (Revelation 22:14 NET).

Those who have access to the Holy City are blessed, those who do not have access are cursed. There is no indication whatsoever that those outside of the New Jerusalem, the lost, have ceased to exist. Indeed, they are said to be “outside.” Not annihilated, not made extinct, but kept outside.

A Final Thought On These Terms

In sum, these terms fire, death, and separation, which are often used to prove the annihilation of the wicked in the afterlife, do no such thing. As we have observed, they are consistent with the idea that the unrighteous experience everlasting conscious punishment.

Summary To Question 35

Do Biblical Descriptions Such As Fire, Death, And Separation Indicate Annihilation Rather Than Eternal Punishment?

The doctrine of hell, the punishment of the wicked, is taught in Scripture. While Bible-believers agree the wicked will be punished, it is type of punishment and its duration which are debated.

As we study the words of Scripture, we find that hell is described in the New Testament by such things as fire, death, and separation. It has been argued by annihilationists that each of these descriptions can be better understood as teaching the ultimate annihilation of the wicked, rather than some everlasting punishment they will receive while in a conscious state. Their arguments go along the following line.

For one thing, fire burns up completely, it consumes what it burns. Therefore, when the Bible describes the wicked as being burned with fire, it should be understood as these individuals being completely incinerated or annihilated. There is no eternal duration illustrated here. Fire puts an end to things.

The word death can also be better understood as referring to annihilation. Indeed, when someone dies their existence on earth is ended. This term is never used of someone who continually suffers. Suffering is over when one dies. Therefore, when one dies eternally, they cease to exist.

We can say the same for the word separation. When the wicked are eventually annihilated, they are separated from the presence of the Lord. Since the Bible says that the presence of the Lord is everywhere in the universe, to be removed from that presence the wicked must be annihilated. As is true with the other descriptions, we have no hint of conscious punishment in this term.

To sum up, those who believe the Bible teaches that the wicked will be annihilated think that these three descriptions are best understood to support that belief, rather than the idea of some conscious eternal suffering. They also cite a number of passages that seem to support their contention.

We respond to this as follows. To begin with, it is acknowledged that it is possible to interpret these symbols as being consistent with the idea that the wicked will ultimately be annihilated. This is not debated. However, even though this is possible, it certainly does not mean that Scripture teaches the annihilation of the wicked.

However, when one takes a closer look at these words, they will discover that they better fit with the historical doctrine of eternal punishment.

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus used fire to describe the suffering which occurs for unbelievers in the next world. We note that this suffering in the fire did not consume the rich man. In fact, he consciously suffered, but he was not incinerated.

We can note the same things with the word death. It cannot always refer to annihilation in each context in which we find it. Furthermore, death refers to separation of the body and the spirit, it never indicates the cessation of existence. Indeed, the dead live on in the next realm, the afterlife.

The same hold true for the word translated separation. The main idea behind this word is certainly not extinction. To the contrary, separation emphasizes the fact that the wicked will be banished from the blessed presence of the God of the Bible.

This banishment is not the same as annihilation. The wicked are separated from the holy presence of the Lord and all the blessings which accompany it. However, they are not separated from His knowledge for He knows what they are doing. Neither are they separated from His wrath. In fact, the Bible make it clear that the Lord is present in His wrath when He punishes the lost.

To sum up, these three descriptions of the destiny of the wicked dead, fire, death, and separation are not terms that indicate annihilation. However, they are descriptions that are consistent with the historic doctrine of the eternal punishment of the unrighteous.

Question 36

The Bible Says The Wicked Will Perish And Vanish Like Smoke (Psalm 37:20), Many Other Places In Scripture Say They Will Be Destroyed. Does This Not Clearly Teach The Eventual Annihilation Of The Unrighteous?

One of the main arguments used by annihilationists concerns the many passages where it speaks of the wicked perishing or being destroyed. It is argued that the word translated “destruction” in Scripture, as well as other similar concepts such as “perished,” have the idea of the extinction of the unrighteous, but they do not convey the idea of everlasting punishment.

A verse often cited for the doctrine that the wicked will eventually be annihilated is found in Psalm 37:20. The context is as follows:

The Lord watches over the innocent day by day and they possess a permanent inheritance. They will not be ashamed when hard times come; when famine comes they will have enough to eat. But evil men will die; the Lord’s enemies will be incinerated they will go up in smoke (Psalm 37:18-20 NET).

These verses compare the righteous with the unrighteous. The Lord looks after the righteous and gives them a permanent inheritance while the unrighteous will die. They will become incinerated and then go up like smoke. The fact that we are told the wicked will become obliterated in this manner has been used by annihilationists to support their belief that the wicked will simply cease to exist.

The Wicked Will Be Destroyed, They Will Perish, Cease To Exist

Many other passages speak of the wicked perishing, being destroyed. We will cite a few of them. The psalmist wrote:

You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name for ever and ever (Psalm 9:5 NIV).

The wicked are destroyed forever. This means they cease to exist.

In another Psalm, we read the following:

For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you (Psalm 73:27 ESV).

Perish has the idea of non-existence, it does not refer to conscious punishment.

In the Book of Esther, we read about perishing. It reads in this manner:

Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish (Esther 4:16 NIV).

Perish in this context means to die. It says nothing about suffering after death.

We find the same meaning for this word in the New Testament. Jesus also talked about the road, or gate, that leads to destruction. Mathew records Him saying the following:

Go in through the narrow gate. The gate to destruction is wide, and the road that leads there is easy to follow. A lot of people go through that gate. But the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it (Matthew 7:13,14 CEV).

Destruction, in this context, is said to be annihilation, rather than eternal conscious punishment.

Conclusion: Not Human Beings Will Exist Forever

Many other examples could be given. To sum up, these passages teach that all human beings are not immortal. Adam was created with the capability or possibility of having immortality, if he obeyed the Lord.

However, he did not and hence humans have lost that immortality. Only those who trust Jesus Christ as Savior will live forever because the Lord will grant them immortality. All others will be annihilated. The terms used to describe their fate, such as “destroyed,” “perished” and “incinerated,” and the such like, make this clear.

However, there are number of responses that need to be made to this claim.

Response: Context, Context, Context

To begin with, the context, in many of these passages, particularly in the Old Testament refers to the “earthly” demise of the person, not their everlasting destiny.

Interestingly, many who hold to annihilationism agree that it is referring to their earthly existence. Nevertheless, they say that this establishes a pattern for their future punishment which the New Testament illustrates.

In other words, these earthly punishments are illustrative of the future destiny of the wicked in the afterlife.

Yet, this is something that must be proven, not merely assumed. As we have seen, the evidence for the eventual annihilation of the wicked is simply not found in Scripture.

Indeed, nowhere do we find that the raised bodies of the wicked will be annihilated, that they will cease to exist.

Annihilation Or Ruin?

The question that needs to be addressed is this: in what sense are the ungodly to be “destroyed?” When they are said to “perish” what exactly does that mean?

Part of the problem seems to lie in our English words “destroy” and “perish.” Examples are often given that when we say something is destroyed, or it has perished, we mean that it ceases to exist.

Yet when we compare how the Scripture uses the Greek words translated “destroy,” “perish” as well as similar terms, we find an entirely different meaning.

In fact, one dictionary of New Testament explains the meaning of the Greek words translated “destroy” and “perish” in this manner.

[They signify] “definitive destruction, not...in the sense of the extinction of physical existence, but rather of an eternal plunge into Hades and a hopeless destiny of death (A. Oepke, “*apollumi*,” Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume 1, p. 396).

This can be illustrated when we examine how the word is used in Scripture. In the Book of Revelation we find a clear example of this:

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. . . As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction (Revelation 17:8,11 ESV).

This verse states that the beast will go to his “destruction.” However, this is not in the same sense that those believing in annihilation understand the word “destruction,” ceasing to exist.

This destruction, as the Scripture later explains, consists of this individual being cast alive in the lake of fire where he suffers endlessly throughout all eternity. We read the following:

The Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 CSB).

The destruction of the beast consists of endless torment. Therefore, it is clear that in this instance, his destruction does not mean his annihilation.

Consequently, the idea behind this word, in this context, is not extinction, or cessation of existence. It has the idea of “ruin.”

Physical Death Is Not Annihilation Or Extinction

As we have noted in Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), unbelievers do exist after their physical death. Consequently, when we are told that people on earth will be "destroyed," this does not mean that they have been made to become extinct. To determine their everlasting destiny, we must look at passages that describe them *after* they have died physically, not before.

Therefore, any passages that speak of the "destruction" of the wicked in this life cannot be used to tell us what will happen to them in eternity. Instead, we must find specific passages that deal directly with this question.

As we will see in our next question, as we look at what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, we will discover, beyond any doubt, that the word destruction, when pertaining to this life, does not equal annihilation or extinction in the next.

Summary To Question 36

The Bible Says The Wicked Will Perish And Vanish Like Smoke (Psalm 37:20), Many Other Places In Scripture Say They Will Be Destroyed. Does This Not Clearly Teach The Eventual Annihilation Of The Unrighteous?

One of the most-often used arguments for annihilation is the repeated use of words such as destroy and perish when used of the fate of the wicked. It is contended that those words do not refer to any type of ongoing punishment in the afterlife but rather speak of a once-and-for all end to the person.

In response we first note that in many of the contexts where we find the words destroy, perish or destruction, the subject is physical death. In other words, it is speaking of the end of existence on earth, nothing more. The subject of what will happen to the unrighteous in the afterlife is not being addressed.

Therefore, many of the illustrations, used to advocate annihilationism from these passages, have nothing to do with the subject. Consequently, the examples are of no value whatsoever in answering the question of the destiny of the wicked after this life is over.

When we do find these words destroy and perish referring to the destiny of the wicked, it is never a clear example of annihilation. Indeed, the words can have the meaning of "ruin," rather than the person ceasing to exist.

In the Book of Revelation, the beast, the Final Antichrist, is twice said to be "going to destruction." Yet, we later discover that his destruction consists of being tormented in the lake of fire forever and ever. So in this case, destruction does not equal extinction or non-existence.

With this example, it is clear that the words destroy and perish, when referring to the fate of the wicked, can certainly mean something other than become extinct or annihilated.

In addition, we know from Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus that this life does not end the existence of unbelievers. Therefore, when the Bible says the living wicked are "destroyed," it does not mean they cease to exist.

Yes, they die physically, but they still exist in the afterlife. To determine what will happen to them for all eternity we must look at specific passages that deal with their destiny *after* they have died.

Our next question will show definitely that those who are destroyed in this life, even incinerated or annihilated, will still exist in the unseen realm of the dead.

Question 37

Does 2 Peter 2:6 Teach That The Unrighteous Will Be Annihilated From The Example Of Sodom And Gomorrah?

One of the passages that is often brought up to establish that the unrighteous will eventually be annihilated in the afterlife is found in Second Peter. It reads as follows:

And if he turned to ashes the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah when he condemned them to destruction, having appointed them to serve as an example to future generations of the ungodly (2 Peter 2:6 NET).

The translation God's Word renders the verse in this manner:

God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and destroyed them by burning them to ashes. He made those cities an example to ungodly people of what is going to happen to them (2 Peter 2:6 God's Word).

Here we are told that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example to what will happen to the future generations of the ungodly.

The Old Testament describes God's judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah:

Then the Lord rained down sulfur and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah. It was sent down from the sky by the Lord. So he overthrew those cities and all that region, including all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation that grew from the ground (Genesis 19:24,25 NET).

Here we have a specific example, in the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, of what will happen to the ungodly in the future. We find that these two ungodly cities were obliterated in an instant. In fact, the annihilation of these evil cities was so complete that there is no certainty today as to the exact location of the cities to this day!

In the same manner, the unrighteous, in the afterlife, will be turned to ashes, annihilated by God's judgment of fire. This is their future according to Scripture.

In fact, annihilationists often point to what happened to Sodom as "the example," or "the standard" of what will happen to the human race in the afterlife. Indeed, the passage clearly states that this is so. In other words, all references to the destiny of the wicked in the afterlife must be evaluated in the light of what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, total extinction.

Response: The Three Examples Of Divine Judgment

There are a number of things to say in response to this claim. To begin with, the subject of this section in Second Peter is "false teachers," and the ultimate punishment they will receive. The idea is that their punishment is

assured, since God has punished gross sin in the past. To illustrate this, Peter gives three previous examples of God's direct punishment of horrific evil. In this context, Sodom is the third example of God's divine judgment in the past.

The first consisted of the angels who rebelled against the Lord. They have been consigned to a prison in the underworld awaiting final judgment and then punishment.

The second example of God's direct intervention were the people in Noah's day. Their sin was so horrendous that the Lord sent a flood which destroyed the entire world of the ungodly. The Lord then promised that He would never destroy the inhabitants of the world by water again.

The third illustration was God's divine intervention on the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. As the Lord had obliterated the inhabitants of these evil cities with a fiery punishment, so shall He do the same to these false teachers. They too, shall be punished with fire. As we have already seen, fire has been a consistent theme concerning the future punishment of the wicked.

Unquestionably Peter sees the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire as a pattern for the fiery punishment of the ungodly in the future. But does this mean, that in the afterlife, the wicked will be obliterated like these two cities? As we will discover, it does not.

The Judgment Of Fire In The Future

The fact that Peter speaks of a future punishment of fire is consistent with what we read in the rest of the Scripture. Nobody doubts this. However, a coming fiery judgment does not necessarily mean the annihilation of the wicked for all eternity.

In fact, there is nothing in this context, or anywhere else in Scripture, that states the wicked will be incinerated and cease to exist once they have been raised from the dead. Indeed, the future fiery judgment spoken of in Scripture has the bodies of the lost being burned but not consumed.

In other words, like what happened to these two cities, there will be a catastrophic judgment of fire. Yet this judgment will not be on those who are living on the earth but rather on the raised bodies of the evil dead. They will be raised to judgment and then a punishment of fire. However, the fires will not incinerate their bodies as was the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. There are a number of reasons as to why we know this.

The Men Of Sodom Will Still Exist On Judgment Day

First, Jesus made it clear that the inhabitants of these cities continued to exist after they were incinerated. Indeed, Christ said that they still have to face punishment at the time of the resurrection of the dead. The Lord made the following declaration:

And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be thrown down to Hades! For if the miracles done among you had been done in Sodom, it would have continued to this day. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for the region of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you (Matthew 11:23,24 NET).

According to Jesus, Sodom and Gomorrah have a future judgment awaiting them. While their upcoming punishment will be less than the city of Capernaum, they will be punished. Furthermore, to be punished on the day of judgment they must still exist!

In other words, the people from Sodom, though incinerated by fire, did not go out of existence. Their punishment did not make them extinct.

Peter Gives Further Information About The Inhabitants Of Sodom

Peter tells us that those in Sodom and Gomorrah are waiting for the future day of judgment where they will receive their eternal punishment. After giving examples of the punishment of angels, the wicked world at the time of the flood, and Sodom and Gomorrah, he stated the following:

The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from their trials, and to reserve the unrighteous for punishment at the day of judgment, especially those who indulge their fleshly desires and who despise authority (2 Peter 2:9 NET).

Those evil people, who were incinerated at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, are now waiting for the day in which they will be judged and then punished by the Lord. In fact, Peter says that they are “reserved” or “kept” for punishment which will take place at the day of judgment. Joining them will be the evil angels as well as the wicked world that existed at the time of the flood.

Consequently, the terms “destroyed” and “destruction,” which are used of what happened to Sodom in 2 Peter 2:6, are used in Scripture to refer to a punishment that does not cause the extinction of those being destroyed. Indeed, the people still existed after their destruction. Scripture makes that clear.

Jude

The Book of Jude gives us further information about the people of Sodom and their future:

And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire (Jude 6,7 NIV).

Note that the inhabitants of Sodom are compared to the angels who sinned. These angels are presently kept in darkness while waiting for the day of fiery judgment, the punishment of eternal fire. The people of Sodom also serve as an example of those who will suffer this same punishment of eternal fire.

We know from Matthew, that Jesus said the eternal fire was originally prepared for the devil as well as his angels:

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41 NIV).

As Jude emphasized, the people of Sodom will meet the same destiny as will the devil and his angels. A few verses later, Jesus tells us of this destiny:

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life (Matthew 25:46 NIV).

Eternal punishment, the destiny of the evil angels, will also be the destiny for the people of Sodom, as it is for all unbelievers.

The Destruction Of Sodom And Gomorrah Does Not Prove Their Annihilation

Therefore, while we agree that the Lord uses Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of what will happen to the wicked in the future, we find that God’s destructive judgment of the inhabitants of these cities, which included their incineration, did not mean that they ceased to exist. Consequently, the destructive punishment that God placed upon the people is compatible with their continued existence.

In sum, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, like the angels who sinned and the people killed in Noah’s flood, are used as examples of God’s devastating punishment of evil; not the fact that He will obliterate or annihilate the wicked in the afterlife.

In fact, we know that the devil, as well as his evil angels, will not be annihilated, but rather will suffer everlasting conscious punishment. It follows that the evil people from Sodom will experience a similar destiny.

While the Lord’s destruction caused the end of their earthly life of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, they did not go out of existence. Indeed, judgment, as well as punishment, is awaiting them.

Summary To Question 37 Does 2 Peter 2:6 Teach That The Unrighteous Will Be Annihilated From The Example Of Sodom And Gomorrah?

One of the verses, often used to support the idea that the future destiny of the ungodly is their ultimate annihilation, is found in Second Peter. In dealing with the destiny of false teachers, Peter uses three illustrations of

God's previous punishment on those who committed gross sin; the angels who sinned, the punishment of the flood in Noah's day, and the obliteration of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We are told that the fiery punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of the coming punishment on the unbelievers, a judgment of fire which annihilates them.

We discover from Scripture that the people of Sodom were incinerated; made completely extinct. It is argued that this serves as an illustration of the future of the unrighteous; they will cease to exist.

However, there is nothing in the context that says the wicked dead will be annihilated. A fiery judgment is coming at the return of the Lord, but the fire that burns the wicked will not consume them. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

Furthermore, while the city of Sodom is indeed used as example of the destiny of the unrighteous, we discover that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, while incinerated in God's divine punishment, did not cease to exist.

In fact, Jesus used them as an illustration of what will take place on judgment day. He said their punishment would be less than the cities which personally witnessed His miracles.

Therefore, while the people in these cities were destroyed, this did not end their existence. Indeed, punishment awaits them in the future after they are raised from the dead.

Moreover, later in the chapter, Peter writes about how evil people, including those from Sodom, are being "kept" or "reserved" for the day of judgment. In other words, there is a future punishment for them. Again, their "destruction" on earth did not end their existence. Hence when the Bible uses the words "destruction" as well as "destroyed," when referring to what happened to these cities, it does not mean their annihilation in the sense that the people forever ceased to exist.

Jude gives the same illustration as Peter. He too stated that, like the sinning angels, the inhabitants of Sodom are waiting for the day of judgment and then the punishment of eternal fire. This agrees with what Jesus taught. The unbelievers will go to the same fiery punishment as the angels who sinned. In all of this, there is no indication whatsoever of their eventual annihilation or extinction.

To sum up, using this one passage to advocate the annihilation of the wicked dead does not fit the totality of the biblical teaching. Indeed, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were not wiped out of existence when God destroyed the city. According to Jesus, these people will be there on the Day of Judgment. While they will receive lesser punishment than the cities that rejected the message of Jesus, they will be punished. And to be punished, they must still exist!

Question 38

Is The Second Death Annihilation? (Revelation 20:14)

Scripture says unbelievers will experience a “second death.” We read about this in the Book of Revelation:

Then a Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death-the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14 NET).

Since the first death is the end of our existence here upon the earth, it has been argued that the second death is the end of the existence of unbelievers in the afterlife. In other words, the second death is the annihilation of the wicked.

Is this what the Bible teaches? Does the second death end all existence for the unrighteous? We can make the following observations.

Death Is Separation

In Scripture, the main idea behind death is separation. Physical death is the separation of the spirit from the body. A person dies when their spirit leaves their body.

While physical death is an enemy of humanity, it is an inescapable fact. Indeed, it is something we all must face. All of us will die.

Spiritual Death Is Spiritual Separation

Apart from physical death, Scripture speaks of another type of death. This is known as spiritual death. From looking at the Bible we find out the following about this other type of death.

Spiritual death is when a person is alive physically, but dead spiritually. All of us are born spiritually dead or separated from God. The Lord said to Adam:

Then the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat fruit from every tree of the orchard, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die (Genesis 2:16,17 NET).

Adam and Eve died spiritually at the time that they sinned. In other words, they became different beings than the ones God had originally created. Indeed, their sin separated them from God. They also began to die physically.

We Are Separated From God By Our Sinful Nature

Humanity is now separated from God because of our sinful nature. The Bible says:

Look, the Lord's hand is not too weak to deliver you; his ear is not too deaf to hear you. But your sinful acts have alienated you from your God; your sins have caused him to reject you and not listen to your prayers (Isaiah 59:1-2 NET).

Our sin has separated, or alienated, us from God.

However, Jesus spoke about what happens to those who have believed in Him. He said that they have passed from death unto life!

I can guarantee this truth: Those who listen to what I say and believe in the one who sent me will have eternal life. They won't be judged because they have already passed from death to life (John 5:24 God's Word).

Our sins have separated us from a holy God. We are under judgment, and then eventual punishment, unless we receive the forgiveness which Christ offers. Once that happens, we then pass "from death to life."

There Is A Third Type Of Death, Eternal Death, The Second Death

There is a third type of death which is taught in Scripture that is different from spiritual death and physical death. This is known as "eternal death," or the "second death." In the Book of Revelation, we read of this second death:

The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will in no way be harmed by the second death (Revelation 2:11 NET).

It is called the second death because it follows the first death, physical death. In physical death the body and the spirit separate, when the second death occurs the person is forever separated from the Lord. In other words, it is an everlasting separation.

Unless spiritual death is reversed in this life, the result will be eternal death, the "second death." This is unending separation between God and all who reject Him. There are several things that need to be understood about the second death.

Believers Are Not Affected By The Second Death

To begin with, believers are not affected by the second death. This wonderful truth is taught in the Book of Revelation:

Blessed and holy is the one who takes part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God

and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years (Revelation 20:6 NET).

The second death has no authority over those who believe in Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus has taken upon Himself the punishment which we so richly deserved. Consequently, we do not need to experience the second death. The price has been paid!

Therefore, for the believer there will be no second death.

The Lake Of Fire Is The Second Death

The final place of punishment, the lake of fire, is the second death. In the Book of Revelation, we read the following:

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death (Revelation 20:14 NIV).

The second death is reserved for unbelievers. Those who experience this death are all those whose names are not found written in the Book of Life:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death (Revelation 21:8 NRSV).

There is a second death for those who reject Jesus Christ. They are thrown into the lake of fire where they will be forever separated from the Lord.

The Second Death Is Not Reversible; It Is Eternal

Eternal death, the second death, is the ultimate form of separation. If a person dies in a state of spiritual death, they enter eternity separated from God. This is the second death. Once a person has experienced the second death there is no hope for them, it is irreversible.

Thus, the reality of a “second death” is clearly taught in God’s Word. This second death can and should be avoided at all costs.

Trusting Jesus Christ as Savior will keep someone from experiencing the second death. This is the remedy that the Lord offers the human race.

The Second Death Is Not Annihilation

Since the first death is not annihilation, neither is the second. At the time of the first death, the body and spirit separate. For the unbeliever, the spirit, the invisible part of humans, is not annihilated. It remains alive and conscious in a temporary state of punishment.

At the time of the second death, the unbeliever, who has been raised from the dead, and then judged, will be separated from God for all eternity. Therefore, after the judgment comes the punishment. There is no

indication whatsoever that the punishment is somehow limited, or eventually stopped. The Bible says that it continues forever.

Therefore, the wicked do not cease to exist at the time of the second death, or at some time thereafter when they have experienced sufficient suffering for their sin.

Summary To Question 38
Is The Second Death Annihilation? (Revelation 20:14)

The Bible clearly teaches that the wicked will experience a “second death.” It is argued that this second death, the lake of fire, will be their annihilation. In other words, at the time of the second death, the unbeliever will no longer exist.

However, Scripture teaches no such thing. The first death, physical death, takes place when a person dies. The body stops functioning but the spirit remains alive in the next world. For the believer, this “first death” is the only death, or separation, which they will experience.

On the other hand, the unbeliever has another death awaiting them, the second death, which is spiritual separation from the Lord for all eternity. Since each of us is born separated from God, in a state of spiritual death, that separation must be reversed in this life. This can only take place when a person places their faith in Jesus Christ. However, for those who reject Christ, the second death, eternal separation of God, is what they will experience.

At the “last judgment,” the unbeliever experiences the final results of the second death, eternal separation from God. They are raised from the dead, judged, and then punished by being thrown into the lake of fire.

There is no indication whatsoever that the unrighteous will be annihilated in the lake of fire. Scripture consistently teaches that the second death is eternal separation from God, and like the first death, it is a conscious existence.

Question 39

Does The Fact That God Will Triumph Over Sin In The End Mean The Wicked Must Be Annihilated?

There are those who argue that God's eventual triumph over sin must mean that the wicked will ultimately be annihilated, or cease to exist. Indeed, it is stated that the eternal existence of a side-by-side heaven and hell would be incompatible with God's stated purpose for the future of the universe.

Argument: Sin Must Be Totally Eliminated From The Universe

When Jesus Christ returns, sin and its horrible consequences will be done away with. Therefore, it is not possible that a certain part of the universe will remain under the blight of sin. The obvious conclusion is that the idea of an eternal hell with the wicked suffering everlasting torment contradicts the biblical teaching that the entire universe will be redeemed.

There are a number of passages in Scripture which speak of a day when all things will be reconciled to Jesus Christ. They include the following.

All Things Will Be Reconciled To Christ

Jesus spoke of bringing all people to Himself. John records Him saying:

I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:32 NET).

How can this be true if there are people who remain in an eternal hell? In what sense will He draw everyone to Himself?

Paul wrote of all things being subjected to Christ while God is "all in all." This is how he put it in his first letter to the Corinthians:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28 ESV).

Again, how can God be "all in all" with people suffering in hell? It seems that this passage demands that some other fate must await the lost. Otherwise, it is hard to see how God can be "all in all."

Paul wrote to the Ephesians about uniting all things in heaven and on earth. He stated the truth in the following manner:

In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:7-10 ESV).

Paul spoke of a day when everything would be reconciled to the Lord. He penned the following to the church at Philippi:

So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10,11 CSB)

He wrote something similar to the Colossians. He put it this way:

And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:20 ESV).

These verses, it is claimed, bring up a problem for those who believe in the eternal conscious suffering for the wicked. It is asked, “How can the eternal existence of unbelievers in hell be reconciled with the biblical picture of God reconciling of all things to Himself?”

If all things are to be reconciled, then it necessarily follows that hell must mean destruction or annihilation. Those who do not believe in the Lord must, therefore, be annihilated, incinerated or destroyed in some manner. Otherwise the statement “all things are reconciled to Christ” seems meaningless, even contradictory.

Response: We Need A Proper Biblical Picture Of Eternity

Those who hold the historical view of hell reject the idea that all evil beings must cease to exist in God’s new order. This is not what the Bible says.

To begin with, Scripture does indeed teach that the God of the Bible will ultimately be victorious over sin. Of this, there is no doubt. He will be “all in all” as Paul has stated to the Corinthians. The question then becomes, “In what sense will He be “all in all?”

The good news is that God answers this particular question for us in the last section of the Book of Revelation. In these last chapters of Scripture, we discover that God’s victory over sin does not mean that all evil beings, whether angels and humans, will cease to exist in the new heaven and new earth. They will exist, but they will exist separately from the Lord, the holy angels, the other spirit-beings the Lord has created, and the believers. The biblical evidence is as follows.

The Beast, False Prophet, And The Devil Are Tormented Forever

In the Book of Revelation, John said the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will be thrown alive into the lake of fire. Their continued punishment is described as follows:

Then the devil who fooled them will be thrown into the lake of fire and burning sulfur. He will be there with the beast and the false

prophet, and they will be in pain day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 CEV).

These three personages will be tormented forever and ever in the lake of fire. Unending punishment is the punishment they will receive for their rebellion against the Lord. This is clear.

The Wicked Dead Receive The Same Judgment

After the judgment of these three personages, the Lord then judges all unbelieving humanity at what is known as the Last Judgment, or the Great White Throne Judgment. At the Great White Throne Judgment, the unbelieving dead will stand before the Lord and judged according to their works. Scripture explains what will happen in the following manner:

I saw a great white throne with someone sitting on it. Earth and heaven tried to run away, but there was no place for them to go. I also saw all the dead people standing in front of that throne. Every one of them was there, no matter who they had once been. Several books were opened, and then the book of life was opened. The dead were judged by what those books said they had done. The sea gave up the dead people who were in it, and death and its kingdom also gave up their dead. Then everyone was judged by what they had done. Afterwards, death and its kingdom were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death. Anyone whose name wasn't written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11–15 CEV).

The wicked dead will be punished with the same fate as the beast, false prophet, and the devil. They will be thrown into the same lake of fire. Like these other three personages, their punishment continues for all of eternity. The fire burns them, but it does not consume them.

A New Heaven And New Earth Will Be Created

As we continue to read in the Book of Revelation, we find that after this last judgment, a new heaven and new earth are created.

For the believers, the future is indescribably wonderful! Scripture says that there is no crying, no pain, and there never will be for all eternity. John wrote:

Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look! God's dwelling is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will exist no longer; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away (Revelation 21:3–4 CSB).

However, the same is not said for the wicked dead. We read about their horrible fate later in this chapter in the Book of Revelation. It says the following.

But the cowards, unbelievers, vile, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars—their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death (Revelation 21:8 CSB).

Consequently, after the last judgment, when the new heaven and new earth have been created, the wicked are *still suffering* in the lake of fire. These evil beings have not been annihilated or incinerated in the lake of fire. They continue to exist in God's new world.

As we read further, in chapter twenty-two of the Book of Revelation, we find that John contrasted the joy of those who are allowed to enter through the gates into the city of God while the godless who are outside the Holy City. He explained the contrast as follows:

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood (Revelation 22:14–15 ESV).

According to this passage, there are still people “outside” of the city. There is no indication that they have ceased to exist. Therefore, in this description of eternity, the wicked have not been annihilated. They are still alive, but they have been separated from the Lord and His people.

While those who believe in the ultimate annihilation of the wicked may find a problem with wicked angels and evil humans existing eternally in God's new universe, even though God reconciles everything to Himself, the Bible does not see this as a problem. God is victorious over sin yet there are wicked beings which still exist in His renewed universe. This is what the Bible teaches.

Therefore, the fact that the wicked are eternally alive and conscious and are punished in the lake of fire, at the same time believers are rejoicing in heaven, is not something incompatible with God being “all in all.”

God will triumph over evil, but this does not mean that all wicked beings will be annihilated. Scripture is clear that they will continue to exist.

Summary To Question 39

Does The Fact That God Will Triumph Over Sin In The End Mean The Wicked Must Be Annihilated?

One of the main themes in the Bible is God's ultimate victory over sin and death accomplished through the Person of Jesus Christ. Scripture says that Jesus came to earth to do away with sin and death. His own death on the cross was a victory over evil. Sin, therefore, will not win in the end. Everyone acknowledges this. The paradise which was lost in Eden will be regained because of what Jesus has accomplished. This is the message of the gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ.

With this truth in mind, it is argued that the thought of an eternal hell, where the wicked are consciously suffering, is inconsistent with this biblical view of the future. The Bible says that Christ will be “all in all” and will have reconciled “all things” to Himself. Why then, if Christ has conquered evil, would we still expect to see it existing in the new heaven and new earth? In fact, we should not expect this.

Therefore, the wicked dead must be annihilated. This is how the argument goes.

However, the Bible does not say this. The Book of Revelation makes it clear that the beast, the false prophet and the devil are cast alive in the lake of fire. There they will be tormented forever. Sometime after this occurs, the wicked dead will be raised and judged in the presence of the Lord. They will then be punished by being thrown into the same lake of fire. We are then told the Lord creates a new heaven and a new earth.

Then, we are informed that the believers will live in the New Jerusalem, the Holy City. The gates are open wide where the redeemed are able to come and go as they please.

However, Scripture indicates that there are unbelievers, who continue to exist, who are outside of the Holy City. This means that wicked people still exist after the last judgment and their being thrown into the lake of fire. There is no end for their punishment and no hope that they will join the believers.

Consequently, while God does indeed triumph over sin and evil as Scripture proclaims, the wicked will not cease to exist in eternity. Instead, they will be eternally punished while remaining in a conscious state. Such is the fate of those who reject Jesus.

Question 40

Does Mark 9:42-48 Teach Eternal Punishment For Unbelievers?

There is a statement made by Jesus, recorded in Mark's gospel, which addresses the question of the final destination of the wicked. In discussing the issue of causing others, or oneself, to sin, Jesus said the following:

And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:42-48 NIV).

In context, we find that Jesus is speaking to His disciples about the danger of causing others, and well as oneself, to stumble. Twice in this passage He speaks of hell, and in both instances, He gives a description of hell, the final punishment. This description is consistent with the rest of Scripture which teaches that the fires of hell consist of everlasting conscious punishment. The fire never burns out.

Annihilationist Explanations

Annihilationists, of course, disagree with this understanding of the passage. However, they must provide an alternative answer to the seemingly obvious interpretation of what Jesus meant.

Their answers are usually along the following line.

1. Unquenchable Means Cannot Be Resisted

Some argue that the figure of "unquenchable fire" stands for fire that cannot be resisted; not a fire that cannot be extinguished. Accordingly, it means that humans cannot stop God's fiery judgment. It will therefore burn up whatever is put in its way. Indeed, it is not possible to stop it or resist it. This truth is illustrated in the words of John the Baptist. Speaking of the coming Christ or the Messiah, he said:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12 ESV).

Jesus, the coming Messiah, will burn the chaff with a fire which cannot be stopped. It will be futile to resist.

Thus, the use of the adjective “unquenchable” in this context in Mark does not mean that the fire never goes out. Instead, it simply means that the fire cannot be resisted. Nothing is said as to the duration of the fire.

2. Are The Worms Eternal?

Another reason to reject the historical view has to do with the illustration of the worms. Should we also assume that there are worms which exist forever and cannot be consumed by fire? This is seemingly what we would have to accept in order to believe this passage speaks of eternal torment by a fire which cannot be extinguished.

Therefore, we have clues in the context that tell us that we are not to understand Jesus’ statements in a literal manner. Indeed, if we are not to accept literal worms, then why should we accept the idea of a literal fire that burns forever but does not consume the person? It is contended that we should not.

Therefore, annihilationists see no solid arguments for the historical view of hell in these verses.

Instead they think this passage is consistent with the idea that the wicked will be annihilated.

Response From The Historical Perspective

As is true in the other examples, the various explanations by the annihilationist are unconvincing. There are a number of things we can mention.

The Fire Cannot Be Extinguished

First, the word unquenchable means inextinguishable. It has nothing to do with a fire which cannot be resisted. The word translated “unquenchable” has the idea of something which cannot be put out.

Consequently, Jesus is not saying the fire cannot be resisted, He is saying the fire cannot be stopped. The fire constantly burns. A fire that is “unquenchable” is, by that very fact, a fire which is eternal or unending. This means that the punishment which the fire describes must, of necessity, also be unending.

The New English Translation actually uses the word “inextinguishable” in translating the words of John the Baptist with respect to the unending fire. It puts it this way:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clean out his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the storehouse, but the chaff he will burn up with inextinguishable fire (Matthew 3:12 NET).

Therefore, the fire is without end. It can never be put out.

He Is Not Speaking Of Eternal Worms

Furthermore, there is no need to assert that Jesus is speaking about worms which are eternal or live forever. The worm may be a symbolic reference to the person who is suffering the judgment. These unsaved individuals will not die or cease to exist.

The fact that the worm does not die is significant. This idea, along with emphasis on eternal fire, both speak of God's endless punishment. Again, this is consistent with the rest of Scripture in its explanation of the ultimate fate of the wicked.

To sum up, Jesus says the fire in hell is unquenchable or inextinguishable, and it is a place where the worm does not die. This is certainly consistent with conscious suffering but it is not consistent with annihilation. Indeed, one really has to stretch the language to deny that it is unending punishment that Mark is talking about here.

Summary To Question 40

Does Mark 9:42-48 Teach Eternal Suffering For The Wicked?

Mark 9:42-48 records Jesus saying that the wicked will be sent to a place of unquenchable fire. In this place, we are told, the worm does not die. This is one of the central passages, used by those who hold to the historical view of hell, as supporting this doctrine. Jesus makes the destiny of the unbelievers clear. Indeed, they will consciously suffer for eternity and their suffering will consist of a punishment of fire.

Annihilationists disagree with the historical understanding of this passage. They believe that the Scriptures consistently teach that the wicked dead are eventually annihilated. As far as they are concerned, there is no eternal suffering for the lost. This being the case, they must interpret these verses in Mark in a manner which provides a reasonable alternative explanation to the historical view. They attempt to do this in a number of ways.

Some argue that the idea behind the word unquenchable is that it cannot be resisted. Hence, Jesus is speaking of a punishment of fire which nobody can stop, but He was not speaking of a punishment of fire which cannot be extinguished. Punishment is certain but the type of punishment or the duration of the punishment is not stated.

The worm which Jesus mentions in this passage is not to be understood literally unless someone wants to argue that there are indestructible worms which will last for all eternity. If the worms are not literal worms, then neither is the fire a literal fire.

The interpretation of the annihilationist is that the worms, along with the fire, destroy the bodies of those who have died. Indeed, Jesus does not specifically say the worm and the fire are tormenting the wicked dead for all eternity. Therefore, after a certain amount of punishment, the body of each unbeliever will be incinerated by means of the fire.

Consequently, Jesus' emphasis in this passage is that the fire will not be extinguished, neither will the worm die out, until the time the wicked person has been incinerated. At that moment, the worm will indeed die and the fire will be quenched.

These objections to the historical understanding of this passage do not make any sense. To begin with, Jesus spoke of an "undying" worm and an "unquenchable" fire. This describes the nature of the worm and the fire, they never cease to exist. This is consistent with the idea of everlasting punishment.

The fire cannot be extinguished. It will never go out. This is the plain meaning of the words of the Savior. It does not mean a fire which cannot be resisted.

Furthermore, no matter how a person interprets the meaning of the term "worm" in this passage, Jesus clearly said that it will never cease to exist.

Consequently, Jesus gave no indication the fire would run its course and then burn out, or that the worm would eventually die out when the punishment in hell, the lake of fire, was completed.

Again, we find these statements of Jesus to be consistent with the doctrine of the everlasting conscious punishment for unbelievers, but it is hard to comprehend how it could be referring to the annihilation of the wicked.

Question 41

Does 2 Thessalonians 1:5–9 Teach That The Wicked Will Be Destroyed Or Annihilated?

One of the passages used by those who believe in the eventual annihilation of the wicked dead is found in the first chapter of Second Thessalonians. It reads as follows:

This is evidence of God's righteous judgment, to make you worthy a of the kingdom of God, for which in fact you are suffering. For it is right for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to you who are being afflicted to give rest together with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. With flaming fire he will mete out a punishment on those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will undergo the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his strength (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 NET).

Paul tells the Thessalonians that those who do not know God, and do not obey the gospel, "will pay the penalty of eternal destruction." This is their destiny. Paul describes their eternal destruction as a penalty, or a punishment, for rejecting Christ.

The issues before us in this passage are the following: how should we understand the word "destruction" as well as the statement that these unbelievers will be "forever separated from the Lord."

How are we to interpret these statements?

The Argument Of Annihilationists

Annihilationists argue that these unbelievers will perish or be burned up. In other words, they will be gone forever. The result is everlasting separation from the presence of the Lord. They have no hope of ever entering His presence. Nothing is said in this passage about conscious everlasting suffering.

1. Punishment Is Permanent

It is argued that the word "eternal" is used to emphasize that the punishment is permanent. In other words, there is no potential way in which these wicked dead will ever be made right with God. They are forever excluded from His holy presence. Their doom is eternal.

However, while their punishment may be eternal, this does not mean that their suffering will be endless. The result is permanent, but the act of punishing is not permanent.

The punishing they will personally receive will one day stop. At some point, they will be destroyed, annihilated.

2. God's Presence Is Everywhere

There is also the statement of Paul that these wicked dead will be sent away from His presence. Since the presence of God is everywhere in the universe, the only way in which this could happen is that they ceased to exist. Otherwise, there is no place where they could flee from his presence.

Indeed, Scripture makes it clear that God's presence is everywhere. The psalmist wrote asked the following question:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
(Psalm 139:7 NIV).

The answer, of course, is nowhere. It is not possible to go to a place where God cannot be. This being the case, the wicked, of necessity, must be made to be extinct. They must cease to exist. Otherwise, they could be someplace in the universe where God cannot reach, which, of course, is not possible.

Consequently, it is argued that this passage in Thessalonians is consistent with the idea of the annihilation of the wicked dead.

Response To This Argument

These arguments of the annihilationists do not explain away the clear sense of this passage. A number of observations can be made.

1. They Will Suffer Punishment

This passage says the unbelievers will suffer punishment. They will pay a penalty for their sin. As we have previously emphasized, annihilation is not punishment. Indeed, there is no idea in the Bible of a “once-and-for-all” punishment of the lost. Instead, the Scriptures teach that the punishment is ongoing.

2. Eternal Destruction Is Not Annihilation

Next, the Greek word used in this passage, which is translated as “destruction,” does not suggest the idea of annihilation. Indeed, it has more the idea of “ruin.” As we have noted elsewhere in the examples of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as with the future of the devil, they were “destroyed” but they did *not* cease to exist.

From the totality of Scripture, we discover that this separation involves ongoing “punishment.” It is something which takes place in an active way. In other words, their punishment will continue, it is not merely one act of destruction or obliteration. It is ongoing and it is eternal. Indeed, punishment and separation require a conscious existence.

3. A Proper View Of God's Presence Is Needed

There is another point which needs to be emphasized. God's presence, as used in this passage is not referring to what is known as Him being

everywhere-present in the universe, His omnipresence. This is not what is in view here.

Rather, the verse refers to the special presence of the Lord as the One who provides for His people all the blessings He has promised. Only believers can be in the presence of the Lord in this sense. This is the specific “presence” in which these unbelievers find themselves separated.

However, we are told that the unbelievers will be tormented in the presence of the Lord!

If anyone worships the beast and his image, and takes the mark on his forehead or his hand, that person will also drink of the wine of God’s anger that has been mixed undiluted in the cup of his wrath, and he will be tortured with fire and sulfur in front of the holy angels and in front of the Lamb (Revelation 14:9,10 NET).

Consequently, these unbelievers will be in God’s presence, but not His blessed presence! They will be in His presence for the purpose of punishment.

Therefore, the separation from His presence, referred to in Second Thessalonians, must mean His Holy presence.

Consequently, this passage in Second Thessalonians does not provide evidence that the wicked dead will one day be annihilated. Instead, it confirms the historical view that they will suffer endless punishment apart from the holy presence of the Lord in an eternal hell. In other words, it supports the historical view of hell.

Summary To Question 41 Does 2 Thessalonians 1:5–9 Teach That The Wicked Will Be Destroyed Or Annihilated?

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he explained what would occur when Jesus Christ returns to the earth. Among other things, he said the wicked would pay a penalty; they would be sent away from the presence of God, on their way to eternal destruction.

This passage has been used as an example of Scripture teaching the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked. Indeed, it is consistent with the rest of Scripture as to the fate of the lost.

Those who hold to the doctrine of the annihilation of the wicked interpret this passage differently. They believe it teaches the wicked will be destroyed. These unbelievers will cease to exist rather than be punished eternally in a conscious state.

For one thing, they argue that the punishment the wicked receive is eternal. In other words, their judgment is their everlasting removal from God’s holy presence. However, the punishing itself is not eternal. While they will be eternally removed from His presence, there will be no everlasting torment

for the wicked. The eternal punishment the wicked dead receive means they will never be able to be with the believers in His presence. This is accomplished through their annihilation.

Furthermore, there are those who insist that being removed from the presence of Christ can only mean annihilation. They reason in the following manner. Since God exists in every place in the universe, this means there is not any place where He does not exist. Therefore, if the wicked will not be in His presence, which, by definition, is everywhere in the universe, then they must not exist at all.

Consequently, these verses teach that there will come a day when unbelieving humans will no longer exist. They will be annihilated.

However, these verses do not teach the doctrine of annihilation as some contend. Instead they are consistent with the rest of Scripture as to the fate of the wicked. They will suffer endless punishment.

To begin with, this passage emphasizes that these unbelievers will pay a deserved penalty for their sin. It clearly says that will be punished! As we have mentioned previously, annihilation is not punishment.

In addition, the word translated destruction does not mean annihilation in this context. Rather it has the idea of “eternal separation” rather than one act of annihilation or extinction. As we have seen in the examples of the people of Sodom, as well as the future of the devil, their “destruction” does not mean that they cease to exist.

Indeed, there is no idea that the wicked will cease to exist when they are sent away from the presence of the Lord. Rather, this means they are not included in all of the wonderful things surrounding heaven. This is something which only believers will experience. Therefore, the presence which Paul refers to in this passage is God’s immediate presence. What he is saying is that the wicked are not in any type of relationship with Him. The presence is not referring to His “omni-presence,” the truth that God is, in some sense, everywhere in the universe at once.

We must be careful not to confuse this. The presence these people are sent away from is His immediate presence. In other words, it is the presence in which believers are rewarded with the joys of heaven. Therefore, the wicked dead can be said to exist in some particular place in the universe without being in God’s presence.

In fact, in the Book of Revelation we are told that those who take the mark of the beast will be tormented day and night in His presence. Consequently, they are separated from the place where believers are blessed, His holy presence, to a presence where unbelievers are punished.

In sum, when this passage is properly understood, it harmonizes with the rest of Scripture which teaches the everlasting punishment of the wicked and not their obliteration or annihilation.

Question 42

Why Does Matthew 25:41-46 Teach, Beyond All Doubt, The Everlasting Punishment Of The Wicked?

The debate over the ultimate destiny of the wicked basically revolves around two central questions. First, do the unrighteous experience conscious punishment in the afterlife? Second, if they are consciously punished, does this punishment go on forever?

There Are Three Passages Which Settle The Matter

To answer these questions we must go to the only source that has the answers, the Bible. As we have observed, there are many passages which teach, or infer, the everlasting punishment of the wicked. However, there are three places in Scripture, one in Matthew, and two passages in the Book of Revelation, where the questions about the destiny of the wicked are settled beyond any reasonable doubt.

We will look at each of these passages in great detail in the next three questions. In doing so, we will first give the annihilationists understanding of the passage and then respond to it. When we are finished, we trust it will be clear, that there is no real doubt that the Scripture speaks of the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked in hell.

Matthew 25:41,46

It is in Matthew's gospel where we find the main passage in the teachings of Jesus that contrasts the fate of the saved and the lost. When Jesus was delivering His last lengthy sermon to His disciples, known as the Olivet Discourse, He ended it by illustrating His return to earth to judge the nations.

In His illustration He compared this judgment of the people to a king dividing between sheep and goats. He put it this way:

Then he [the king] will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:41-46 ESV).

In this illustration, the goats, or the wicked, will go away into eternal punishment, while the sheep, or the righteous, will go away into eternal life. Jesus also says that the punishment of the wicked consists of fire. This is

the same fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels. The fate of each group could not be much clearer. The righteous receive eternal life while the unrighteous suffer an eternal punishment, consisting of fire, which is away from the presence of the Lord.

Those who hold to the eventual annihilation of the wicked dispute this interpretation. They believe this passage is compatible with the wicked dead being annihilated rather than suffer eternal conscious punishment.

Many Issues Are Involved In This Passage

There are a number of issues which arise in this passage. Does the word translated, “eternal” mean “forever” or does it merely mean “age-long, a limited amount of time?” Are the wicked punished once-and-for-all “for” all of eternity, rather than being constantly punished “in” eternity? Does destruction mean annihilation or conscious punishment?

The case for annihilation of the wicked dead is argued in the following manner.

The Word Translated Eternal Can Mean Age-Long It Does Not Necessarily Mean Everlasting

One of the issues of contention in this passage is the meaning of the Greek word translated as “eternal” in this context. Basically, there are two possibilities as to the exact meaning of this Greek adjective. It can mean “age long” or “lasting for an age” or it can mean “everlasting,” or “forever.” The context must determine whether this word is used in a limited sense of time, age-long, or in an unlimited sense, eternal. The word itself can have either meaning. Everyone acknowledges this.

Many of those who argue for the annihilation of the wicked believe the word means “age long” in this context. Thus, the punishment of the wicked is not everlasting but only for a limited period of time. After that time is completed, the wicked dead are then annihilated.

The Argument That Unbelievers Are Not Punished For Eternity

There is another point which is raised. Annihilationists agree that eternal life will be the conscious and continuous relationship with the living God, through the Person of Jesus Christ. There is no question about this.

However, they say that this does not necessarily mean that eternal punishment must be exactly the opposite of eternal life, a continuous and conscious experience of suffering for the unbeliever. While the two destinies of humans and angels may be eternal, it does not necessarily follow that both are conscious destinies. We should not make that assumption.

It is clear that in this passage Jesus stated that there will be two destinies for human beings. Annihilationists agree. Yet, they contend there is

nothing in Jesus words which specified the nature of the destiny of the wicked.

This allows Bible students to look at other passages to discover the meaning of His words. It may mean everlasting conscious torment or it can mean annihilation or incineration of the wicked. The text allows both possibilities. While it teaches the finality of God's judgment upon the wicked, nothing is specifically said about the nature or duration of that punishment.

There Is Eternity Of Result There Is Not An Eternity Of Process

Some annihilationists argue for what is known as an "eternity of result," not an "eternity of process." They recognize that Jesus is speaking of the eternal punishment of the wicked. However, they argue that Jesus says nothing specific about the nature of this punishment. While the "punishment" of the wicked is forever, the "punishing" of the wicked is not.

The wicked are punished eternally in the fact they are annihilated and are not able to enter God's holy presence. However, there is no continual punishing of them. Therefore, this passage is stressing the fact of their eternal punishment, but not the nature of that punishment.

The word translated "eternal" should, therefore, be taken qualitatively with the idea of "irreversible" rather than quantitatively with the meaning of "everlasting." This distinction must be understood.

Putting it another way, the word eternal communicates a finality of the consequences of sin rather than speaking of a process that never ends. In other words, the word eternal does not refer to the action of punishing, but rather the results of God's punishment. Consequently, we often hear annihilationists speak of "an eternity of results."

Support For The Idea Of Eternity Of Results

In fact, there are passages which do describe eternal sin as having eternal consequences. What is emphasized is not the action of punishing but rather the results of the punishment. Jesus said:

But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin (Mark 3:29 NET).

In this case, the sin has eternal results, consequences that last for all eternity. Indeed, the person can never be forgiven. Therefore, the word eternal, in this context, is not describing an ongoing action.

In the Book of Hebrews, we also find the idea of eternal results when the word eternal is used:

And by being perfected in this way, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:9 NET).

Jesus' one sacrifice has resulted in our eternal salvation.

Therefore, the word eternal can describe the results of an action rather than an ongoing action itself.

Summation On Matthew 25

These are some of the arguments given by those who reject the historical doctrine of hell. They believe Jesus' statements, which Matthew records, can be reconciled with the doctrine of annihilation. Eternal or endless punishment of the wicked is not the necessary interpretation of Jesus' words here in Matthew according to those who reject the idea of everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked. It is more likely that the Lord is stressing the endless results, not the endless punishing.

Response To A Non-Historical Interpretation Of This Passage

The arguments used by annihilationists to give an alternative explanation of this passage do not really explain the clear statements of Jesus as to the fate of the wicked dead. We can make the following observations.

1. Eternal Means Everlasting, Not Age-Long

To begin with, the word translated "eternal" in this context can only mean everlasting, or without end. For one thing, we find this particular word in other contexts which deal with the future, or the coming age. Whenever we do this, we discover that this same term *always* means everlasting, or without end. It never has the meaning of age-long or for a limited duration.

The same hold true for its use in Matthew gospel. In Matthew, this adjective translated "eternal" always refers to that which is everlasting or endless. Thus, when Matthew uses this word, he has forever or eternity in mind. This is the normal meaning of the word. It is "without end."

Therefore, when Matthew records Jesus using the word in this context it means an unlimited duration of time.

2. The Word Eternal Modifies Both Life And Judgment

There is something else which must be considered. It does not make sense that the eternal punishment of the wicked is illustrated by a fire which lasts for a long time but not forever, while the believers will experience eternal life which is life without end. If both are "eternal," then it logically follows that either both are to be taken as lasting a long time but limited in duration, or both terms mean without end or everlasting.

Indeed, it has long been pointed out that the phrases "eternal punishment" and "eternal life" are parallel. Thus, it seems absurd to suggest that in the same sentence eternal life will be forever, while eternal punishment will have a definite end. All agree that the eternal life of the believers will be endless. Therefore, it only makes sense that the eternal punishment will likewise be without end. Jesus' words could not be clearer.

3. The Greek Word Used Means Punishment Not Annihilation

In addition, the specific Greek word *kolasis* that Jesus uses for the fate of the wicked is never used in the New Testament to mean annihilation. To the contrary, it always has the idea of punishment. Eternal punishment is the destiny for the wicked dead.

Furthermore, annihilationists are mistaken when they contend that Jesus does not tell us the nature of this punishment. He does. Indeed, He has given the nature and the duration of the punishment earlier in this passage. He says that the wicked go into the “eternal fire.” The punishing, as well as the punishment are forever.

“Fire” in this verse is a picture of the lake of fire, the place of everlasting torment. The term “fire” is used in this same sense earlier in Matthew’s Gospel by John the Baptist. He made it clear that those who reject Jesus the Messiah will be burned up with “inextinguishable fire,” it can never be put out. Matthew records John saying the following about Jesus:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clean out his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the storehouse, but the chaff he will burn up with inextinguishable fire (Matthew 3:12 NET).

Thus, the separation from the presence of the Lord Jesus means that there is conscious suffering forever in the lake of fire, or hell. It does not mean annihilation or incineration.

4. Heaven And Hell Were Both Prepared By The Lord

We need to make another observation about Jesus’ words in this passage. He made it clear that heaven and hell were prepared by God Himself. These two eternal destinies have been created by the God of the Bible. Eternal life in heaven consists of having a relationship with a Person, the Person of Jesus Christ. John records Jesus saying:

This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and the One You have sent—Jesus Christ (John 17:3 CSB)

Eternal life, life everlasting, life without end, consists of an endless relationship with Christ Jesus. This is the great promise of the Lord and the hope of believers.

On the other hand, the same adjective translated eternal means everlasting punishment for those who reject Christ. We read in Mark’s gospel the following words of Jesus:

But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin (Mark 3:29 NIV).

To say these people can, “never be forgiven” seemingly can only make sense if they are around for all eternity.

What Settles The Issue: Unbelievers Will Experience The Same Destiny As The Devil

From these verses, we note that the wicked will experience the same destiny as Satan and his evil angels. Indeed, these verses explicitly tell us that the eternal fire was created specifically for the devil and his angels:

Then He will also say to those on the left, ‘Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41 CSB).

Fatal to the idea of some sort of annihilation of the wicked is the fate of the devil. Jesus explicitly stated that this lake of fire, the place of eternal punishment was prepared for the devil and his angels. From Scripture, we know that the devil will not be annihilated in this fire.

We read about this in the Book of Revelation:

The Devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 CSB).

He, along with two human beings, the beast and the false prophet, will experience ongoing punishment “for all eternity.” In other words, it is not talking merely about eternal results. Indeed, the Scripture is speaking of continual punishment. Yes, the results are eternal, but so is the punishment.

This should once-and-for-all settle the matter as to whether Jesus’ statement refers merely to the effects of the punishment. It does not. It refers to both the effects of the punishment as well as the duration of the punishment. The devil will not be annihilated, neither will his evil angels be annihilated, and neither will the unrighteous dead.

Therefore, when all the evidence is in, we find that the historical understanding of this passage in Matthew is the correct view. The wicked will experience everlasting conscious punishment apart from Christ while the believers will experience everlasting bliss in His presence. The explanation of the annihilationist does not fit all of the facts.

In sum, the destiny of the wicked consists of eternal results as well as ongoing punishment.

Summary To Question 42 Why Does Matthew 25:41-46 Teach, Beyond All Doubt, The Doctrine Of Everlasting Punishment?

One of the clearest portions of Scripture which supports the historical view of hell is found in Matthew 25:41-46. In these verses, Jesus makes it obvious that the wicked will consciously suffer for all eternity for their rejection of Him. Those who have believed in Jesus Christ will enter everlasting life, but the unbelievers will experience everlasting punishment.

This is the plain teaching of this passage as well as the historical way in which it has been interpreted.

Those who hold to the view that the wicked will eventually be annihilated, rather than suffer eternal conscious punishment, must therefore give an alternative explanation of this passage, an explanation which makes more sense than the historical understanding. They have attempted to do this. There have been a number of ways in which they have claimed that this passage does not teach the everlasting conscious punishment of unbelievers.

Often it is meaning of the word eternal that is challenged. It is pointed out that this word can be translated “age long” in certain contexts. This implies limited duration. Therefore, it is possible that this is the meaning here. The suffering of the wicked is real, but it is only for a limited time. After this limited time of suffering is over, they will then be annihilated.

Some who hold to the doctrine of annihilation believe that the word translated eternal does mean “without end” or “everlasting” in this context. It does refer to eternity. However, it is said that it is the punishment, not the punishing which is endless. How can this be so?

According to this view, the wicked are punished forever in the sense that they are never allowed to be in the presence of the Lord. This is their eternal punishment. In other words, they will never end up in heaven as the doctrine of “universalism” teaches.

It is stressed that Jesus said nothing in this passage as to the nature, or duration of their punishment. Therefore, we should not necessarily assume that the wicked must consciously suffer for all eternity in order to be punished eternally.

Thus, they contend Jesus said that unbelievers will be punished for all eternity by the fact that they will cease to exist. This is their punishment, and it is irreversible; they will never experience the joys of heaven. However, there will be no everlasting ongoing punishing of them.

As we have previously mentioned, some teach that there will be a certain degree of suffering that each unbeliever must experience before they are annihilated. After they experience this limited suffering in the eternal realm, they are then annihilated. Therefore, what the passage is teaching is that there is some suffering in the eternal realm but not for the duration of eternity. This distinction must be kept in mind.

While these are some of the responses for those who hold to annihilationism, none of these answers fits all of the biblical facts.

To begin with, as it has been often pointed out, the same word translated “eternal” modifies both the word for life, as well as the word for punishment. Thus, the logical conclusion is that if the life is eternal, then the punishment must also be eternal. If this is not the case, then a person would have to say that heaven is only age-long. Nobody says this.

It is also incorrect to say that Jesus does not describe the punishment in this passage. He does. The Lord specifically says that the fire is “eternal.” This fire, He said, was originally prepared for the devil and his evil angels.

Thus, the question becomes why would the fire burn forever if the wicked were annihilated at some point? There is no reason for this to happen. Consequently, we conclude that it makes more sense to understand that they do not merely suffer eternal results but rather they also suffer ongoing punishment for all of eternity.

Add to this the word translated “punishment” never has the idea of annihilation or obliteration. It refers to conscious punishment. This further supports the historical view of the nature of hell, the final destination of the wicked.

However, the matter of the fate of the wicked dead is settled by the fact that Jesus said these unbelievers are thrown into the same lake of fire as the devil and his angels.

We know that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will be consciously punished forever for their sins. In other words, their punishment will be unending. This means that the lake of fire does not consume them. They are not annihilated or made to be extinct. Since the unrighteous are said to be given the same destiny, the lake of fire, it follows that they too will endure conscious punishment for all eternity.

Therefore, the historical understanding of this passage is the only one that really makes sense when all the facts are considered. The wicked will be sent off to the eternal fire where they will suffer eternally. The various explanations of the annihilationists when weighed in the balances are found wanting.

Question 43

Why Does Revelation 14:9–12 Make The Doctrine Of Everlasting Punishment Of The Wicked Beyond Dispute?

In the Book of Revelation the author John records the third angel saying that anyone who worships the beast, the final Antichrist, and his image “will be tormented with fire and sulphur” and that “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever.” He put it this way:

And a third angel followed them and spoke with a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, which is mixed full strength in the cup of His anger. He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the sight of the holy angels and in the sight of the Lamb, and the smoke of their torment will go up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or anyone who receives the mark of his name. Here is the endurance of the saints, who keep the commandments of God and the faith in Jesus” (Revelation 14:9-12 CSB).

According to this passage, these people will have no rest whatsoever as their suffering continues, day and night, forever and ever. In other words, it is endless suffering. These unbelievers will experience it in the presence of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, and His holy angels.

While this is another verse which is often used to refer to the conscious everlasting punishment for the wicked, annihilationists disagree with this interpretation. They believe that this verse does not have be interpreted in this manner.

The Smoke Is Forever Not The Punishing Of The Wicked

Those who hold to the idea of the annihilation of the wicked do not believe that this speaks of the wicked being punished for all eternity. Rather, it is the smoke from this fire which will be forever. Nothing is specifically stated about the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked. Therefore, the smoke, not the punishing, is everlasting.

The Example Of Babylon

While the smoke from their punishment rises forever, their punishing does not last forever. This is illustrated with the fate of the city of Babylon. We read the following in the Book of Revelation:

Then a second time the crowd shouted, “Hallelujah!” The smoke rises from her forever and ever (Revelation 19:3 NET).

We discover in this verses that the smoke from the destruction of the city goes up from her “forever and ever.” However, Scripture makes it clear that the city of Babylon is not going to burn forever and ever. In fact, we

are specifically told that the city will be destroyed before the Lord Jesus returns to the earth. The Bible puts it this way:

Then one powerful angel picked up a stone like a huge millstone, threw it into the sea, and said, “With this kind of sudden violent force Babylon the great city will be thrown down and it will never be found again” (Revelation 18:21 NET).

This shows that the fire that engulfed Babylon will accomplish its designed purpose. It has burned up, or incinerated, what was placed into it but the fire does not burn forever.

Consequently, the rising smoke is symbolic of the fact that these unbelievers have been completely burned or incinerated. It is a once-and-for-all event. While the smoke of their torment rises forever, the text does not specifically say that they will be forever tormented. Therefore, we must be careful to make this distinction. To sum up, this passage supports annihilation, not eternal punishment.

Night And Day Describe Kind Of Time Not Duration

There is also the argument from the words “night and day.” These words are not speaking of the duration in which the evil suffer, but rather the kind of time which they are suffering. In other words, they are suffering during the day and at night until their suffering is ended. It is wrong to conclude that these words must mean endless suffering.

Response:

While it is true that the smoke rising forever does not necessarily mean that the burning will last forever, as in the example of Babylon, there are a number of things in this passage which clearly teach everlasting conscious punishment. In fact, it is beyond dispute.

There Is No Rest For Them

First, we are told that there is no rest for the wicked. This is in contrast to the rest the believers will eternally experience. “No rest” speaks of unending punishment, there will be no relief from the torment they will experience.

The Words Day And Night Are Consistent With Everlasting Punishment

The fact that they are tormented day and night is another way of saying “endless.” There is no indication whatsoever that the torment ceases. While it does indeed express “kind of action,” that the torment occurs at all hours of the day and night, this does not mean that this verse excludes the duration of time. The phrase is consistent with the idea of everlasting torment. This is the natural way of understanding this phrase. In other words, the punishing is constant.

In fact, the expression “day and night” is indicative of ceaseless activity. This same phrase is used elsewhere in the Book of Revelation of the never-ending worship of God:

Each one of the four living creatures had six wings and was full of eyes all around and inside. They never rest day or night, saying: “Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God, the All-Powerful, Who was and who is, and who is still to come . . . For this reason they are before the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them (Revelation 4:8, 7:15 NET).

We couple this with what we read later in Revelation about the destiny of the devil, the beast and the false prophet.

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented there day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 NET).

The Greek text in this verse explicitly states that the punishing for these personages is not only “day and night,” it is also “to the ages of the ages.” This is the strongest way the Greek language can express eternal duration. In other words, the original text here leaves no doubt as to the duration of their punishment, it is forever.

Consequently, when we put these words “day and night” alongside the expression, “forever and ever” in Revelation 14:11 we have the most emphatic expression of unending, ceaseless activity possible in the Greek language. The punishing is unending!

Punishment Will Be To The Ages Of The Ages, Forever

There is more. This same Greek phrase is also used in the Book of Revelation for the length of God’s life, forever:

Then one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God who lives forever and ever (Revelation 15:7 NET).

The God of the Bible does indeed live forever.

In another place, this expression is used for the length of the reign of God’s bond-servants with Him:

There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 22:5 NIV).

We will reign with Him forever and ever.

Therefore, since the same phrase “forever and ever” is used for the duration of the punishment of wicked, it seems beyond all doubt that their punishing will never cease.

There Is No Hope For The Wicked

In sum, John uses these phrases “forever and ever,” “no rest day and night,” to remove any hope of escape or relief from the punishment these people will receive. It also stresses that their torment is eternal in its duration. Since it is unending, these unbelievers will not be “annihilated” at some future time.

Once again, we have a passage that speaks of the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked. This does not teach their ultimate incineration or annihilation.

Indeed, when we examine this passage, in context, there is really no getting around the fact that the wicked will suffer consciously for all eternity for rejecting God’s truth. In other words, this passage, along with Matthew 25:41,46 makes the doctrine of unending punishment of the wicked beyond dispute.

Summary To Question 43

Why Does Revelation 14:9–12 Make The Doctrine Of Everlasting Punishment Of The Wicked Beyond Dispute?

There is a passage found in the Book of Revelation which gives one of the strongest testimonies to the doctrine of the eternal conscious suffering of the wicked. It is contained in Revelation 14:9-12. These verses speak of the penalty of those who worship a future world ruler, the person called “the beast.” He is also known as “the final Antichrist.” These worshippers of this man of sin are sentenced to be tormented night and day in the presence of the Lord forever and ever. Eternal conscious punishment of the wicked is the clear teaching here.

Those who hold to the doctrine of annihilation reject this interpretation. They do not see the unbelievers as being eternally tormented while in a conscious state. Instead, this passage speaks of their removal from the presence of the Lord.

The rising smoke, they contend, will exist forever, but the people will not exist forever. The smoke will serve as a memorial to the Lord’s judgment of the wicked as well as His ultimate triumph over sin. It, however, does not mean that there are people forever existing in conscious torment in the lake of fire. Consequently, the smoke exists forever, the people do not.

Sometimes there is an argument from the Greek phrase translated “day and night.” This phrase is not describing the duration of the time that the punishment will take place, but rather the kind of time it will occur, nighttime and daytime. The text says that those who are being tormented may be tormented any time of the day or night. In other words, there is the constant threat of torment. Yet the length of the torment is not made

specific by this phrase. Hence, there is nothing in this text which says the torment must last forever, only that it can occur at any time that these unbelievers still exist.

Furthermore, when it says the wicked are being tormented, it is referring to the exact moment they receive their condemnation from the Lord. In other words, it occurs when they are annihilated.

It is front of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, they are punished but this is a temporal punishment, not ongoing. We should not confuse it with the eternal state. Nothing in the text says that they must be kept alive to be tormented forever. This had to be read into the text.

Again we find this interpretation entirely unconvincing.

First, there is the phrase “day and night.” While it does indeed express “kind of action,” that the torment occurs at all hours of the day and night, this does not mean that this verse excludes the duration of time. Indeed, this is the natural way of understanding this phrase, it is constant. In fact, the same phrase is used elsewhere in the Book of Revelation for the continual worship of the Lord. Therefore, this phrase is consistent with the idea of everlasting torment.

The fact that the Scripture emphasizes that they have “no rest” is another indication of the ongoing conscious punishment. This is in contrast to the believer who is promised everlasting rest in the presence of the Lord.

Finally, we have the duration of their punishment emphatically given to us in the Greek text. It is to the “ages of the ages.” This construction is only used to describe unending duration as is illustrated with the punishment the devil, the beast, and the false prophet receive. Indeed, Scripture is clear that these three personage are continually punished forever.

Therefore, we conclude that this is another passage which teaches the doctrine of the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked. In fact, when all the facts are considered, it is really beyond dispute.

Question 44

How Does Revelation 20:10–15 Help Settle The Matter As To The Eternal Destiny Of The Wicked?

One of the most awesome and frightening passages in Scripture is found in the Book of Revelation in its description of the Last Judgment, or what is also known as the Great White Throne Judgment. It reads as follows:

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented there day and night forever and ever Then I saw a large white throne and the one who was seated on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. Then books were opened, and another book was opened- the book of life. So the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to their deeds. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each one was judged according to his deeds. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death- the lake of fire. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, that person was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10-15 NET).

In this passage John writes that anyone whose name is not found written in the book of life is thrown into the lake of fire. This is called the second death.

Annihilationists Say Fire Incinerates The Wicked Dead

Annihilationists believe this passage is consistent with the idea that the wicked will be incinerated rather than being tormented with eternal fire. Indeed, fire burns, it incinerates. Common sense tells us that nothing burns forever.

Therefore, the Lord gave us the illustration of the wicked being burned in the lake of fire to communicate a simple fact; that these unbelievers are eventually annihilated or totally consumed. This is the usual way the annihilationist looks at this passage.

The Second Death Is Extinction

Since the wicked are annihilated, the second death they experience is extinction. Physical death ends all life here upon the earth while the second death ends life in the next world.

The Beast And The False Prophet Are Symbolic, Not Literal People

Scripture says that the beast and false prophet, along with the devil, are tormented forever and ever. While those who hold the historic view believe this clearly portrays everlasting punishment for the wicked, annihilationists disagree.

Many of them argue that the beast and the false prophet are not actual people, but rather they are symbolic. Therefore, we are not dealing with two literal people being tormented for all eternity. Since Revelation is a highly symbolic book, we should not attempt to interpret these symbols in a literal manner.

Response To The Idea The Wicked Are Incinerated

These arguments of the annihilationists will not stand. This passage says that the wicked will suffer endless torment. There is no pause to their suffering and there will be no end. Indeed, the literal meaning in this passage could not be clearer. A number of points need to be made.

The Beast And The False Prophet Had Been Thrown In Earlier

The Bible says that the names of the people which are not found written in the book of life will be thrown into the same lake of fire as the devil, the beast, and the false prophet. They will also suffer the same result.

Earlier John had this to say about the destiny of the beast and false prophet:

But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 19:20 NIV).

The beast and false prophet had already been thrown into the lake of fire one thousand years before the devil met the same fate. Yet they are still alive at the time when Satan meets his doom, as well as the time when the wicked dead meet their doom:

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented there day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10 NET).

This passage is highly instructive. Note that the passage specifically says that “they” will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Though the beast and the false prophet had already been in the lake of fire for an extended period of time, a thousand years, these two beings were not consumed.

The Beast And False Prophet Are Humans

Contrary to the view of annihilationists, the beast and the false prophet are actual humans, they are not symbolic of something else, as is often the way they are characterized.

Indeed, when we are told that they are symbolic our question immediately becomes, “Symbolic of what?” Behind every symbol there is a literal reality. The problem with the annihilationist position is that there is no agreement

as to what they are symbolic of, merely it is agreed that they are not literal humans.

But this is not the way in which these two personages are portrayed in the Bible. In our book, the Final Antichrist, we demonstrate that the overwhelming evidence from Scripture is that these are two literal people who will arrive on the worlds scene immediately before the Second Coming of Christ.

There is something else which must be reckoned with. Not only does the Scripture consistently portray them as genuine people, we are told in this passage that they are “tormented” forever and ever! How, we may ask, does one eternally torment something symbolic? The simple answer is one cannot. This passage clearly speaks of punishment, God’s retribution against evil people.

The Wicked Can Exist In The Fire

Furthermore, since the beast and the false prophets are not angels but rather are human beings, this further indicates that evil humans can be thrown alive into the lake of fire without being consumed or made to be extinct.

Since the fire does not consume these two personages, then why should we assume that the same fire incinerates other humans who are cast into it? We should not. The fire of hell will not obliterate them. These unbelieving people will suffer endless torment. This is their awful destiny for rejecting the living God.

In fact, the eternal extent of their punishment is in contrast to the fate of the redeemed. John wrote about this:

There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 22:5 NIV).

The redeemed will reign forever and ever while the lost will suffer forever and ever. This is the obvious meaning of this passage.

These Three Passages Provide A Conclusive Answer To The Destiny Of The Wicked

In summary, these three passages, one from Matthew and two from Revelation, that we have looked in these last three questions, are more than adequate to answer the questions as to the eternal destiny of the wicked.

The language is explicit, emphatic, and decisive. These verses by themselves should be sufficient to settle the argument forever.

Summary To Question 44
How Does Revelation 20:10–15 Help Settle The Matter
As To The Eternal Destiny Of The Wicked?

The Book of Revelation describes an awesome scene known as the Great White Throne Judgment, also known as the Last Judgment, or the Final Judgment. At that time, all the wicked dead will be judged for their sin and then punished by being thrown into a lake of burning fire. This is also called the “second death.” It is eternal separation from the presence of the Lord.

Annihilationists believe that the fire will totally incinerate these people, they will cease to exist. They reject the historical view that the wicked will experience everlasting conscious torment in the fiery lake. Therefore, the second death that the wicked will experience is everlasting extinction, they will be consumed by the fire.

In addition, the beast and the false prophet are often not viewed as literal people but rather as symbols. Since symbols cannot suffer punishment, this is not talking about any unending torment of the wicked.

Those who believe Scripture teaches the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the wicked see it differently. They believe this passage is clear as to the fate of unbelievers.

Indeed, one thousand years before the final judgment occurs, the beast and false prophet had been thrown alive into the lake of fire and sulfur. At the time of the final judgment, they are still alive in the lake of fire. This fits what the Scripture says with respect to their destiny, that these two personages will be constantly tormented day and night forever and ever.

Scripture also says that the wicked dead are thrown into this same lake of fire. Since the Bible, in the same context, has already explicitly stated that these two evil personages were thrown alive into the lake of fire, and they are still being tormented at the time the wicked dead are thrown into the same fire some one thousand years later, there is no reason to think that the fate of the wicked will be any different. If these two evil beings will remain alive in the lake of fire, then why should we assume that the wicked dead are incinerated by the fire? It seems clear that we should not.

There is something else that should be noted. The beast and the false prophets are human beings. They are not spirit creatures such as the devil and his angels. The fact that these humans can be thrown into the lake of fire, and continue to exist for one thousand years until the time of the Last Judgment, shows us that it is possible for humans to suffer in the lake of fire without being consumed.

Since these two evil humans were not consumed when thrown into the lake of fire, neither should we expect the wicked dead to be consumed.

In sum, these last three questions which we have examined should put to rest any doubt as to the everlasting fate of the wicked. While there are

continued attempts to deny what is clearly taught in Scripture, we have found that these passages are unambiguous, emphatic and decisive. If the Lord wanted to teach the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked He could not have done it in a more unmistakable way.

The Word of God does not contradict itself. It is consistent on every subject in which it teaches. This certainly includes the topic of the destiny of the wicked. The united teaching of Scripture on the matter of hell, the final punishment, is clear. Indeed, those who disbelieve in the God of Scripture will be eternally tormented for their unbelief.

Question 45

Will The Unbelieving Dead Become Non-Existent? Is Annihilationism A Biblical Concept?

Annihilationism is the doctrine that the unbelieving dead do not consciously suffer eternally in hell, but rather are annihilated, made extinct, at some time after their physical death. In other words, they will cease to exist at some point in the future. As we have acknowledged, there are sincere Bible-believers who embrace this viewpoint.

The Bible Does Not Teach Annihilationism

The Scripture is clear on this issue. Death is not a cessation of being for either the believer or the unbeliever. After looking at the arguments both for and against the idea of the annihilation of the wicked, we can make the following observations.

Observation 1: Jesus Said Unbelievers Will Experience Eternal Punishment

Jesus said the following concerning the fate of humans who have not believed in Him:

And these will depart into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:46 NET).

A person can exist without being punished, but that person cannot be punished without existing. Something must exist to be punished. As we have seen, the Bible consistently teaches that the wicked are not annihilated in eternity but have a conscious existence where they are punished.

Observation 2: The Bible Teaches That The Human Spirit, The Soul, Lasts Forever

Nowhere does the Bible teach the doctrine of conditional immortality. Indeed, the Bible teaches that every human, not just the believer, has been made to exist forever.

The Book of Genesis gives us the account of the fall of humanity. With it, came the pronouncement of death upon Adam as well as his descendants. The Lord said to him:

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return (Genesis 3:19 NIV).

The body of Adam, which was created from the dust, will return to dust. It will cease to be alive. That has been true for humanity down to the present.

However, while the bodies go to the grave and return to dust, the spirits of the dead survive death. The spirits of the believing dead go immediately into the presence of the Lord. This has been true since the beginning.

On the other hand, the Bible teaches that the spirits of the unbelieving dead are separated from God's holy presence. Their spirits are in a state of conscious suffering, they *never* become extinct or are annihilated. Indeed, we find from the totality of Scripture that the spirit of each human being lasts forever. It does not cease to exist.

**Observation 3: God Is Love, But He Is
 Also The Righteous Judge**

We are told that God must eventually annihilate the wicked because He is a God of love. While it is true that God is love, He is also a righteous God. Sin must be punished. The Bible records the Lord saying the following about Himself:

Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel (Ezekiel 33:11 ESV).

There is no pleasure for God in the punishment of the wicked, but evil must be punished. Those who have trouble with the idea of eternal punishment, because God is love, should also have trouble with any punishment that comes from God.

Yet, as Abraham stated, God, the judge of the earth, will always do what is right:

Far be it from you to do such a thing-to kill the godly with the wicked, treating the godly and the wicked alike! Far be it from you! Will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?" (Genesis 18:25 NET).

The Lord will indeed do that which is right.

If God is love, then why has He punished humankind at all? Once a person allows that God has the right to punish in time, the question becomes, "Why is God allowed to punish people in time but not in eternity?" Therefore those who appeal to the love of God are not consistent in their arguments.

Furthermore, annihilation is not punishment! Judgment consists of punishment. There is no punishment for the wicked if they merely cease to exist.

**Observation 4: In The Bible, Destruction
 Is Not Annihilation**

As we have seen, the passages which use the word destruction, and are appealed to in order to teach the annihilation of the wicked, do no such

thing. The destruction of the unbeliever means to be sent away from the blessed presence of the Lord. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (2 Thessalonians 1:9 ESV).

The only implication of the biblical passages, which speak of the wicked as perishing or being destroyed, is that the unbelievers are deprived of the presence and fellowship with God. It says nothing about them ceasing to exist. Destruction is not annihilation.

In other words, the unbeliever is denied access to God. This is consistent with what the Bible teaches about death. It is separation, never extinction. This was the curse which Cain suffered. He recognized that God would hide His face, or separate Himself, from him. This will be the everlasting outcome of those who do not know Jesus.

This passage teaches us something else. It states that the destruction does not take place when the unbeliever dies, but rather at the coming of Christ.

Consequently, it cannot be said that the wicked are “destroyed” or “annihilated” at death, they are not. In fact, they are not ever annihilated or made to become extinct.

**Observation 5: We Do Not Understand The Depths Of Evil
And Why It Must Be Punished**

Those who support annihilationism seemingly do not really understand the extent of evil. Sins are committed against God. Who are we to tell God what is fair? He is the One who determines what justice demands. How do we know when a person has suffered enough? What gives us the right to tell God what He can and cannot do?

Those who are punished eternally serve as a reminder of the depth of mercy of God to those who are not punished. All of us deserve punishment. The fact that anyone is saved is a tribute to God’s amazing grace and mercy. It reminds us from what we have been saved.

**Observation 6: The Bible Foretells The Resurrection Of
The Wicked And A Second Death**

The Bible clearly foretells the resurrection of the wicked, and a second death for them. In the Book of Acts, it records Paul saying the following:

I have a hope in God (a hope that these men themselves accept too) that there is going to be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous (Acts 24:15 NET).

Everyone will be raised. This includes both the righteous and unrighteous. This echoes what Jesus earlier taught.

Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out—the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation (John 5:28, 29 NET).

There will be a resurrection leading to life as well as one which leads to condemnation.

The Bible also speaks further of a second death of the wicked:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death (Revelation 2:11 ESV).

It is clear from the Bible that the wicked are raised, judged, and then die a second death.

Here is the question: why should there be a second death, if, as some contend, people cease to exist when they die? Why raise them to life merely to cause them to cease to exist again?

This argument is countered by some who say that the wicked are raised to have a second chance, or in some cases, a first chance to believe.

There is, however, no biblical justification for arguing that the unrighteous are raised to have a chance to believe after they had died.

The Bible makes it clear that after death there is judgment:

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27 NIV).

Notice that judgment comes *after* death, not annihilation or another chance to believe. This indicates that physical death is NOT the final judgment of the unbeliever! There is a judgment after death that leads to punishment.

Others say that when the wicked are raised they will be punished, but not eternally. The duration of their punishment will depend upon the extent of their wickedness. However, the idea of a limited suffering of the unrighteous, followed by extinction or annihilation, is nowhere taught in Scripture.

Observation 7: The Biblical Description Of The Intermediate State Supports Conscious Punishment In The Afterlife

The Bible speaks of the state of the unbelieving dead as consciously suffering in the next world. In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, (Luke 16:19-31), the rich man, in Hades, was reported to have said the following things:

So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire’ (Luke 18:24 NIV).

Existence for the unbeliever does not end with their death. They are suffering in the next life and their suffering is continuous. Furthermore, the unrighteous will know who they are, why they are there suffering their deserved punishment, as well as having no hope of ever escaping. In other words, they will not cease to exist, nor will they be ignorant of their past life.

Observation 8: The Unbelievers In Hades Have Been Suffering Since The Beginning Of Creation

Not only does the Bible teach that unbelievers in the intermediate state consciously suffer, they have been suffering since the moment they have died.

In Jesus’ story of the righteous Lazarus and the ungodly rich man, each of them went to separate places upon their death. As we just observed, the rich man in Hades was not asleep, was not annihilated. He was suffering in a conscious state.

Therefore, it may be asked, if the dead are going to eventually be annihilated, then why are they now consciously suffering? Indeed, some of them have been suffering for thousands of years!

One would think that either they would be unconscious until the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment, and then obliterated if the doctrine of annihilation were true.

Otherwise, if all the unrighteous are thrown into the lake of fire, and annihilated at the same time, this means that some of them have been consciously suffering for thousands of years while others only recently went to the realm of the dead. There does not seem to be much proportional punishment if this scenario is true.

Observation 9: Will Only Humans Be Annihilated In The Lake Of Fire And Not Evil Angels? Why Punish Angels Eternally And Not Humans?

Scripture teaches that the lake of fire was prepared for the devil and his angels. Unbelieving humans will also go there. We know that one created spirit-being, the one who became the devil, will not be annihilated in the lake of fire.

Neither will two humans, the beast and the false prophet. Since the evil angels, as well as the rest of the unbelieving humans will be thrown into the lake of fire, the natural assumption is that they will receive the same fate.

**Observation 10: If The Evil Angels Are Punished Eternally,
Then There Will Still Be Evil In The
Universe**

Some argue that those humans, who do not go to heaven, must be annihilated in the afterlife. Otherwise there would still be evil in the universe if they still existed. That, they contend, is contrary to what the Bible says about the entire universe being remade, restored to perfection.

Well, what about the evil angels? Are we to assume that they will be annihilated too? The evil angels and the unbelievers are all going to the same lake of fire. Will humans be annihilated while angels will not?

**Observation 11: The Unbelievers Will Never Have Any Rest
In The Afterlife**

We are told that those in hell, the lake of fire, will have no rest either day or night. In other words, it is unceasing. We read of this in Revelation: It says:

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 (Revelation 14:11 ESV).

This is another indication that the punishment is eternal. As we saw earlier, the phrase “forever and ever” is the strongest way in which the Greek language can emphasize eternity.

**Observation 12: If All Unbelievers Are Thrown Into The Lake
Of Fire At The Same Time, How Can There
Be Degrees Of Punishment?**

The Bible says that at the Great White Throne Judgment all of the unbelievers are thrown into the lake of fire:

If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, that person was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15 NET).

If they are all thrown into the lake of fire, and then all annihilated, it doesn’t seem consistent with Jesus’ teaching about degrees of punishment. In fact, there are a number of statements made by Jesus, as well as other New Testament writers, with respect to degrees of punishment that the unrighteous will experience in the afterlife. This would not be possible if everyone was immediately annihilated.

In addition, this also is at odds with the idea that some annihilationists hold, that each person will suffer proportionally for their sin and then be annihilated. However, if the fire incinerates, as is consistently claimed by annihilationists, then there could not be any distinction between the punishment each would receive. Indeed, each person would immediately cease to exist.

If annihilationism is true, then why does the Bible teach different degrees of punishment? Jesus spoke about this when He said the following:

And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare *himself* or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47,48 NKJV).

Not everyone will be treated the same in the afterlife. Jesus taught this when He pronounced punishment against certain cities which rejected His teaching:

Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you" (Matthew 11:20-24 NIV).

Some will be more harshly punished than others. Why would this be the case if everyone was eventually annihilated? Does this mean one person will suffer a few years and then be annihilated while others suffer many more years before they are annihilated? If so, this would mean that the annihilation of the wicked dead would be an ongoing process. Yet there is not the slightest hint of something like this in Scripture. Indeed, according to the Book of Revelation, everyone who is thrown into the lake of fire is thrown in at the same time.

Paul told the Romans that God will judge everyone according to the deeds that they have done:

But because you are stubborn and refuse to turn from your sin, you are storing up terrible punishment for yourself. For a day of anger is coming, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will judge everyone according to what they have done (Romans 2:5,6 CEV).

If annihilation will take place when everyone is thrown into the lake of fire, then there could be no degrees in future punishment. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that not everyone will be punished to the same degree.

Observation 13: Believers Must Be Saved From Something

The Bible says that Jesus Christ came to earth to be the Savior of humanity. In fact, Jesus said the following about His mission:

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10 NIV).

To be our Savior, we have to be saved from some type of punishment. Extinction is not a form of punishment. We must be saved from something!

Observation 14: What Jesus Said About Judas Does Not Make Sense If Annihilation Is True

Jesus also made an ominous statement about the traitor Judas:

The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born (Matthew 26:24 ESV).

Why did Jesus say it would have been better if Judas had never been born? If Judas were merely annihilated, why say it the way that He did?

Consequently, according to the words of Jesus, the eternal destiny of Judas will be far worse than annihilation.

Observation 15: The Teaching Of Annihilationism Can Lead To Greater Sin For The Unbeliever

If the doctrine of annihilation is true, then no real punishment awaits the unbeliever. Consequently, there would be no motivation to do anything good, or to turn to Jesus for forgiveness. On the contrary, there would be every motivation for the unbeliever to do more and more evil.

And why not? If there is not going to be any real penalty to pay for sin, or even a limited penalty, then why should anyone restrain themselves from sin?

Observation 16: A Biblical Comparison Of The Beast And False Prophet Shows That Death Is Not Annihilation

A comparison of two passages in the Book of Revelation, 19:20 with 20:10, shows that death is not annihilation. The beast and the false prophet, two human beings, are thrown in the lake of fire:

But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 19:20 NIV).

A thousand years after this happens, we read the following:

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 (Revelation 20:10 ESV).

After a thousand years in the lake of fire, the beast and the false prophet are still there; they have not been annihilated. In addition, we are told that the unbelievers are thrown into the same lake of fire as the beast and the false prophet. Are we to assume that they are incinerated in the same lake while the beast and false prophet are not?

Therefore, as we have been emphasizing, when we examine the totality of Scripture, we find that the wicked dead are not annihilated but rather are punished consciously for all of eternity.

There Are Three Major Problems For Annihilationism

Not only does annihilationism contradict what the Scriptures clearly says, there are three major problems for anyone who holds this view. They are as follows.

Problem 1: What Kind Of Punishment Is Annihilation?

According to one form of annihilationism, an unbeliever is merely raised at the last judgment and then annihilated. The question therefore is, “What kind of punishment is this?” The person is not punished at all for their sin.

Therefore, those who have lived lives of terrible evil are merely blotted out of existence without paying *any* penalty for their sins. In a sense, they have gotten away with their sinful deeds.

Consequently there would be no justice in the universe. This is entirely inconsistent with the God of Scripture who is a God of justice. Indeed God says that He will bring justice to the wicked. What kind of justice is annihilation?

Problem 2: Why Don't Those Who Pay For Their Sins Go To Heaven?

There is a further problem. One form of annihilationism says that the wicked will pay for the sins for a certain amount of time and then they will be annihilated. Once they have suffered sufficiently, they cease to exist. This form of annihilationism at least allows some degree of punishment. But it also creates a major problem. If the sins of the individual have been paid for, then why aren't they allowed in heaven? Why are they annihilated? Sin is what is keeping people out of heaven. If they have no sin to suffer for, then why aren't they allowed into the presence of the Lord?

Problem 3: Why Isn't Annihilationism Directly Taught In Scripture?

If the doctrine of annihilationism is true, then why don't we find it taught in Scripture in the many passages that speak of the final state of the wicked.

Why isn't annihilationism ever discussed in any of these passages? We should expect to find something said about this doctrine, if it was true. Yet there is no hint of the doctrine of annihilationism in Scripture. As we have observed, the passages used to support the eternal annihilation of the wicked do no such thing.

Conclusion: Annihilation Is Not A Biblical Doctrine

We conclude that the Bible does not teach the doctrine of the annihilation of the wicked. To the contrary the wicked will be eternally punished by the Lord and they will remain in a conscious state for all of eternity. According to Holy Scripture, this is the terrible fate which awaits those who reject the Savior.

While there are many today who are saying that annihilationism is merely another interpretation of the destiny of the wicked, and it is just as orthodox as the historical view, we beg to differ. It is not a viable alternative.

Summary To Question 45

Will The Unbelieving Dead Become Non-Existent?

Is Annihilationism A Biblical Concept?

Many people who believe that the Bible is the Word of God embrace the doctrine of the ultimate annihilation of the wicked dead. While this view is becoming more popular, it is not what Scripture teaches on the subject of the ultimate destiny of the lost.

Indeed, there is no convincing biblical support whatever for the idea that the wicked will cease to exist after they die. The Bible clearly teaches a conscious existence after this life is over, for believers as well as for unbelievers.

For one thing, the spirits of human beings have been created to exist forever. There is nothing in Scripture which gives the slightest hint that any of us will ever go out of existence after death.

In addition, God is a righteous God who judges sin. Since God has punished sin in time, it is certainly consistent that He would continue to punish sin in eternity.

We also find that passages that speak of the destruction of the wicked are not referring to annihilation. In fact, all of the passages speaking to the demise of the wicked can be harmonized with the idea of conscious punishment.

The word translated "eternal" means everlasting, or forever, in the contexts which deal with the afterlife. Nowhere do we find that it means "age long" or is indicating a limited duration.

There is also the problem of our lack of understanding of the depth of evil. The fact that any of us are saved is a testimony to the greatness of the

mercy of God, for all of us deserve punishment. We need the Lord's perspective on this issue of the terrible nature of sin and evil.

Furthermore, the Bible clearly speaks of the resurrection of the wicked, and of a second death. If the wicked were merely to be annihilated in the afterlife, then why raise them again only to annihilate them?

The Bible also describes the afterlife as a place of consciousness for both believer and unbeliever. Scripture says the wicked have no rest. This would seem to rule out any type of annihilation.

There is also the biblical teaching of the degrees of punishment in the afterlife. Jesus taught that people living in certain cities in His day will be punished more harshly than those who lived in the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

How can there be degrees of annihilation? If a person is incinerated then there will be nothing left of them. The destruction is complete. Are we to assume that the annihilation of the wicked is a process that continues for some time after the last judgment? There is nothing in the Bible, that even remotely hints, that something like this will take place.

In addition, the message of the Bible says that believers are saved from something. It is the penalty of sin. This is certainly more than their eventual annihilation.

The statement that Jesus made about Judas also tends to refute the idea of annihilation. If he is merely going to be annihilated, then why emphasize that point that he should never have been born. It would have been better if every unbeliever had never been born. Why single out Judas?

In addition, a comparison of two passages in Revelation shows that the beast and false prophet spend a thousand years in the lake of fire without being annihilated. These are two human beings, not angels. They are able to be consciously punished for one thousand years in a fiery judgment without becoming extinct.

Apart from these issues, there are also three major problems which face the doctrine of annihilationism. They are as follows.

First, annihilation is not any type of punishment. It does not really punish anyone for their sins. It merely makes them non-existent. This is not punishment.

Second, some annihilationists contend that people eventually pay for their own sins by experiencing a certain amount of punishment in the afterlife. After the proper amount of punishment, they are eventually annihilated.

However, this brings up a real problem. Why don't these people then go to heaven? Why are they annihilated once they have paid for their sin? Sin is what keeps people out of heaven. Once they have paid for their sin, it seems that the person should be able to enter the presence of God.

In fact, this is one of the arguments of the universalists, those who believe that everyone will eventually end up in heaven. They believe that once sin is paid for by the suffering of the wicked in the afterlife, then these people will enter heaven. While most people who accept the idea of annihilation reject the doctrine of universalism, they do not have an adequate answer for this question.

Finally, if annihilationism is true, then why don't we find it clearly taught in Scripture? Why is such an important truth not ever directly taught?

If Bible-believers are serious about reaching the world for Jesus Christ, our message must include the biblical doctrines of judgment and then punishment. This judgment consists of endless conscious punishment in a place known as hell. Horrible as this coming punishment may be, this is what the Bible says will happen. Therefore, if we truly care about people, we will warn them of their potential fate.

Yet, we again stress the good news. Jesus Christ has died so that nobody must go to hell! We can be forgiven of all of our sins. Heaven, the presence of the Lord, will then be our destination when we die.

Question 46

What Conclusions Can We Make About The Doctrine Of Annihilationism? (The Wicked Will One Day Cease To Exist)

After looking extensively at the question of the ultimate fate of the wicked, there are a number of observations and conclusions we can make about the doctrine of annihilationism when we compare it to the historical doctrine of an eternal conscious hell for the wicked. The following summary points should be considered.

1. The Historical View Best Fits All The Facts

To begin with, the historical view of an eternal conscious hell for the wicked best fits with all of the biblical facts. While there are isolated passages in Scripture which could be seen to teach the ultimate annihilation of the wicked, there are too many passages which cannot realistically be viewed to teach this.

In fact, it is difficult to see how these passages could be interpreted in any other way than the historical interpretation. Indeed, they clearly state that there is conscious punishment for the wicked in hell.

Bible-believers hold to the fact that God is the ultimate author behind the Scripture. This being the case, if a doctrine is taught, it should be consistently taught. A few texts here and there do not settle the issue. However, the historical view of the doctrine of hell can indeed be upheld from the totality of Scripture. No texts have to be forced.

2. We Should Not Impose Our Views To Settle This Issue

As we stated in our introductory question to this subject, too often it seems that decisions about the eternal fate of the wicked are decided by what *we* think the answer should be. While many give lip-service to Scripture as their ultimate source of truth, in actuality they have become the ultimate determiner of what will occur. Since it is difficult to understand why God would judge someone to eternal conscious punishment, many people do not believe this will happen. However the Lord has warned us that His ways are not our ways:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8,9 ESV).

Let us always remember this!

3. The Love Of God Must Be Properly Understood

The Bible says that God is love. Indeed, God has said this about Himself. Furthermore, He demonstrates His love time and time again to the human

race. Scripture is certainly clear on this subject; the God of the Bible is a God of love.

We Need God's Mind On This Subject

If the God of the Bible is a God of love, then it does seem contrary to His loving character to say that He will *forever* punish those who reject Jesus. The obvious problem is eternal conscious punishment. Whereas it seems reasonable to assume that God would require a certain amount of punishment for the wicked, the idea of the punishment lasting forever seems cruel and vindictive. This is why some people choose to believe the wicked will be annihilated.

While this line of argumentation has convinced many of its truthfulness, this is not what the Bible says about this subject. God is indeed a God of love but that is not the end of the story. The God of Scripture is also a Holy God and He is a God of justice. Love is not the only attribute or characteristic He possesses.

Furthermore, the Bible makes it clear that He is a God who gets righteously angry at sin. Therefore, ongoing punishment against the unbeliever for all eternity is not inconsistent with God's character as revealed in Scripture.

In addition, the eternal destiny of the wicked is a matter in which humans are not qualified to decide. Sinful humanity has sinned against God. He is the One who will decide their fate and He has said that they must be punished eternally while still in a conscious state.

Furthermore, the God of the Bible, the God of love, has stated that He Himself has created hell for the devil and his angels! Hell is a creation of God! He has also clearly stated that wicked humanity will also be sent to that same hell.

There is one final point which needs to be emphasized. Those who end up in hell actually send themselves there. God has done everything He can to keep them from this awful fate. However, what He will not do is violate their ability to choose. The Lord has given us the freedom to determine our own destiny, heaven or hell.

Thus, the fact that He is a God of love does not rule out the possibility of Him eternally punishing the wicked for rejecting His offer of forgiveness of sins. As we have seen, the Scripture says that this is exactly what He intends to do.

We need to take the teaching of God's Word seriously. Indeed, the Bible says that those who teach the truth of the Lord will be judged with great strictness. James wrote.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1 ESV).

This is a warning to all of us who are teaching Scripture. We must teach the entire truth of God. We must be faithful to the task which the Lord has given to us.

4. We Do Not Want To Give False Hope To Unbelievers

This is an important issue. Bible-believers do not want to guilty of giving people false hope about their fate in the next world. It would be horrible if we let people think that it does not really matter at all, or at least, not that much, as to how they behave in this life.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what annihilationists do. They argue that each person, no matter how wicked, will someday cease to exist. It is usually taught that this occurs after the wicked endures a certain amount of punishment. They may be punished for a time, but the punishment will come to an end.

Consequently, unbelievers may choose to live their lives apart from Jesus Christ while being unconcerned that they may have to suffer a little in the next world. In other words, some type of temporary punishment after death is not really that terrifying to them.

Yet if the punishment is everlasting, with no end to it, at the very least, it should cause the ungodly to give serious thought to trusting Christ.

5. We Should Not Water-Down The Gospel

There is something else we should think about. Christians make a terrible mistake when they preach the gospel of Christ merely as a way in which people can achieve some sort of personal peace and happiness. This is not the message of Jesus.

Furthermore, this message will certainly not have any impact among the lost which are presently experiencing some degree of peace and happiness. They will assume that they have no need for the Lord. However, nothing could be further from the truth. This is not the message of the New Testament. People need to come to Christ to escape God's judgment and then His punishment. Jesus said the following:

I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins (John 8:24 ESV).

People will die in their sins unless they believe in Christ.

Paul argues this point in his second letter to the Corinthians. We are to have a holy fear, or respect, for the Lord:

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience (2 Corinthians 5:11 NIV).

The writer to the Hebrews said:

It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31 NIV).

The gospel message means not only turning to Jesus Christ, it also means escaping from the coming judgment. This message must be fully preached!

Conclusion: Annihilationism Should Not Be Taught As An Option

We are also told that this discussion is merely a family disagreement among Christians. In other words, it is fair game to discuss these matters since the annihilationist perspective is well within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. Hell, it is argued, is a secondary issue for Christians, rather than being primary. Annihilationism does not strike at the heart of the gospel or even deny any major Christian belief. Rather, it is simply a reinterpretation of hell. Is this the way in which we should view the annihilationist perspective? Does the Bible allow for this interpretation?

While the subject of annihilationism should certainly be studied by Bible-believers, it ought not to be taught as an option for Christians. While there are good Christian Bible teachers who are actively proclaiming the doctrine of annihilationism, and a certain case can be made for it, at best, the evidence is extremely weak.

Indeed, one must either assume secondary meanings for particular words and phrases, interpret clear passages symbolically, or as some do, deny Jesus meant what He specifically said when He talked about the destiny of the wicked. However, these are not the proper ways in which to interpret Scripture.

Consequently, we believe that it should not be taught by those who take the Scripture seriously. Indeed, this doctrine leads to a severe error; it leads the non-believers to miscalculate what will happen to them in the next world. Though they may be judged and punished, they mistakenly believe that this punishment does not last forever.

Annihilationists often claim that the obliteration of the unbelievers is a terrible destiny for the lost when compared to the things the righteous will experience. However, this is simply not true. There is no real comparison between ceasing to exist and suffering forever in hell. None!

The unsaved man or woman, if they believe the God of the Bible does exist and will judge the wicked, would certainly prefer the doctrine of annihilationism to be true. Indeed, if they do have to face God someday, it will be more comforting for them to believe that any punishment they receive will be limited in its duration. Yet this is not the gospel and Christians should never let people think that they will escape everlasting punishing if they reject Christ.

For any theory of annihilation to be true, future punishment must consist of two things: God's justice as well as His grace. Yet we do not find this taught in Scripture. In fact, Scripture does not give any hint of the cessation

of the punishment, and it also declares, in the strongest of terms, its endlessness

Therefore, the doctrine of annihilationism cannot be reconciled with the totality of the biblical teaching. While there are passages which could be interpreted as teaching annihilationism, this does not prove the doctrine to be true. To be considered as Christian doctrine, annihilationism has to account for *all* of the passages on the subject of the afterlife. As we have so clearly seen, it cannot do this.

Summary To Question 46

What Conclusions Can We Make About The Doctrine Of Annihilationism? (The Wicked Will One Day Cease To Exist)

The historical view of the fate of the wicked is that they will experience conscious suffering in hell, the lake of fire, for all eternity. This has been the position of the great majority of Bible students throughout history.

However, there are those who think the majority of Bible-believers have been wrong on this matter. They do not believe the Scripture teaches this doctrine. Instead, they believe the wicked dead are annihilated or incinerated at some time after the Last Judgment. To them, there is no such thing as the eternal suffering of the lost.

This view comes in various forms. Some hold to what is known as conditional immortality. This is the belief that human beings are mortal by nature but that God grants immortality, the ability to live forever to believers only. According to this perspective unbelievers merely cease to exist, they do not receive immortality. Consequently, immortality is conditioned upon belief.

Another view is known as annihilationism. Annihilationism proper says that while all humans are immortal by nature, God acts upon unbelievers to cause them to cease to exist. In other words, He annihilates them. The end result is the same for the wicked dead, whether one believes in conditional immortality or annihilationism.

While the terms conditional immortality and annihilationism proper are often used synonymously, there are differences between them. However, what is important to understand that those who hold these views conclude that the wicked will one day cease to exist, they will not suffer eternal punishment.

When we look at the case being presented for conditionalism, or annihilation proper, there are a number of observations and conclusions that we can and should make.

To begin with, the idea that the great majority of Bible teachers in the history of the church have gotten this issue wrong, while theoretically possible, is not very probable. Bible-believers from every denomination, for the last two thousand years, have come to the same conclusion on the ultimate fate of the wicked.

Since these facts are admitted by everyone, the people who offer an opposing view must have a compelling case if we are to accept that the majority of Christians have been misguided on this matter. When we examine their arguments for conditional immortality or annihilationism, we discover that they do not make their case.

There are certain passages in Scripture which deal with the fate of the wicked dead that could possibly be understood as teaching their eventual annihilation. This is not denied.

However, there are other passages which really cannot be interpreted in any other way, except in the way they have been historically understood. In other words, they obviously teach the eternal conscious suffering of the wicked dead. In sum, it is the historical view that fits all of the facts of Scripture. Therefore, it is the view which Bible-believing Christians should hold.

This being the case, we should not water-down the gospel by denying the reality of an everlasting hell. Indeed, this will not benefit anyone. Instead, it will actually give the unbelievers a false hope of their eternal destiny. This is something we should not want to do!

Question 47

Will The Wicked Dead Ultimately Be Restored After Suffering For A Time In Hell? Will They Eventually Go To Heaven? (Universalism)

We have seen that there is no solid biblical basis for the idea that the wicked will one day be annihilated after suffering sufficient punishment in hell. Humans have been made to exist for eternity, and there is nothing in Scripture that teaches that someday they will go out of existence.

However, there is another way that people attempt to show that hell does not consist of everlasting punishment for the wicked. Indeed, there is the viewpoint that after the unrighteous are sufficiently punished in the afterlife in hell, they will be restored to God's favor and end up in heaven.

In other words, the suffering in hell is limited, it is not eternal. Furthermore, after the Lord has sufficiently punished sin, all of the unrighteous will enter heaven.

Among other things, this is known as "universalism."

Passages Cited In Favor Of Universalism

Those who have maintained the ultimate restoration of all human beings usually cite the following passages to support their contention.

Jesus spoke of a time when all things would be renewed:

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28 NIV)

The renewal of all things supposedly includes the unrighteous being restored to God's favor.

We read the following words of Peter about this renewal in the book of Acts:

Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:21 NIV).

God will restore everything. It is argued this includes those who were initially sent to the lake of fire.

Paul wrote the following to the Corinthians about what will happen in the future:

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:25, 26 NIV)

Death will eventually be destroyed. Since the main idea behind death is separation, this passage is said to mean that there will be no separation of any being from God in the future. This includes both human and angelic.

In the Book of Ephesians, we read of the Lord bringing unity to all things:

He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment —to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Ephesians 1:9, 10 NIV)

There will be a unity of all things in heaven and on earth under Jesus Christ. Again, this is assumed to mean that all things, as well as every person, will be restored to favor with God.

Paul wrote to the Philippians that everyone would eventually confess Jesus Christ as Lord:

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10, 11 NLT).

If everyone will sooner or later confess Christ, this means that everyone will eventually end up in heaven.

Peter wrote about God's desire that everyone should come to Him in repentance:

The Lord is not slow concerning his promise, as some regard slowness, but is being patient toward you, because he does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance . . . But, according to his promise, we are waiting for a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness truly resides (2 Peter 3:9,13 NET).

If the Lord wants everyone to come to repentance, then everyone will repent. Indeed, God always gets what He wants. Consequently, in the new heavens and new earth righteousness will reside because everyone will be forgiven.

Forgiveness In The Age To Come

Jesus seemed to speak of the possibility of forgiveness in the coming age. He said the following to the religious rulers:

Because of this, I tell you, people will be forgiven every sin and blasphemy, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him. But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the one to come (Matthew 12:31-32 CSB).

These passages are used to argue for the ultimate restoration of all things in heaven. This includes every being, human or angelic. For some, after a

limited duration of the punishment of hell, the unbeliever is able to enter heaven.

Does hell only have a limited duration? Will there be an end to the suffering of the wicked in the afterlife? What does the Bible say?

Response To The Idea Of A Future Restoration Of Everyone

When the Bible is closely examined, we find that punishment after death excludes any chance of the ultimate restoration of the wicked. We can make the following points.

1. The Restoration Has Nothing To Do With Unbelievers

When the Bible speaks of the “restoration,” it is not referring to unbelievers being “restored” to favor with God. In fact, Scripture is clear that the wicked are to undergo punishment in the afterlife. Peter wrote about their present confinement awaiting the time of judgment.

The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from their trials, and to reserve the unrighteous for punishment at the day of judgment (2 Peter 3:9)

For the wicked, there is a judgment coming after death and with the judgment, punishment.

2. There Are Two Types Of Resurrections

Jesus spoke of the resurrection from the dead in this manner:

I assure you: An hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, so also He has granted to the Son to have life in Himself. And He has granted Him the right to pass judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come out—those who have done good things, to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked things, to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:25-29 CSB)

The Lord Jesus declared that there will be only two types of resurrections from the dead. There is one that leads to life, and one that leads to judgment or punishment. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

Jesus also made it clear to the unbelieving religious rulers that they could not go where He was going:

Later Jesus said to them again, “I am going away. You will search for me but will die in your sin. You cannot come where I am going.” The people asked, “Is he planning to commit suicide? What does he mean, ‘You cannot come where I am going?’” Jesus continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You belong to this world; I do not. That

is why I said that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I Am who I claim to be, you will die in your sins (John, 8:21-24 NLT).

Notice that Jesus said that these religious leaders “could not come where He is going.” Not then, not ever. In addition, these people would die in their sins if they do not believe in Jesus. In all of this, there was no hope whatsoever that was given to them of an eventual restoration.

In sum, these sayings indicate there is a finality to the decisions which we make in this life.

Indeed, Scripture consistently represents God’s judgment as based upon what happens in this life. In another place, Jesus said:

We must do the works of Him who sent Me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work (John 9:4 CSB).

These words of Jesus intimates that there will come a time when no one will be able to work any longer. In other words, time will be up. This is consistent with other passages that there no opportunity to secure salvation after death.

In fact, the words from the writer to the Hebrews make this clear:

And just as it is appointed for people to die once— and after this, judgment (Hebrews 9:27 CSB).

Judgment comes after death. And with judgment, punishment.

3. Jesus’ Declaration About Judas

The declaration of Jesus regarding the betrayer Judas does not fit with any idea of a final restoration:

The Son of Man will go as it is written about him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would be better for him if he had never been born (Matthew 26:24 NET).

Why would Jesus say this about him if he was eventually going to be restored to heaven?

4. Judgment Of The Sheep And The Goats

In Matthew 25, Jesus illustrated the judgment of the nations. All of the nations are gathered before the King and their destinies are then announced:

Then he will say a to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels . . . And these will depart into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life’ (Matthew 25:41,46 NET).

These words from Jesus are not consistent with the idea of a future restoration of all things. Indeed, the wicked depart to the eternal fire to experience eternal punishment.

5. There Is No Forgiveness In The Age To Come

The idea that somehow there will be forgiveness in the coming age is not what Jesus was teaching. Instead, Jesus was saying in the most emphatic way possible that forgiveness in the age to come is impossible!

6. Will Everyone Be Forced To Go To Heaven?

Should we assume then that everyone will eventually go to heaven whether they want to or not? It seems that if universalism is true, then this is exactly what will happen. In other words, nobody will have a choice in the matter.

7. It Makes This Life Meaningless

Probably the strongest argument against a future restoration is that it makes our present life insignificant, if not meaningless. Ultimately, what we do in this life has little, or no, importance in light of eternity.

Many more things could be added. However, the point is clear: according to the Bible, there will never be a restoration of the wicked from hell.

Summary To Question 47

Will The Wicked Dead Ultimately Be Restored

After Suffering For A Time In Hell?

Will They Eventually Go To Heaven? (Universalism)

There are some Christians who believe that hell will only be a temporary place of punishment of the wicked. They contend that once the punishment of God has been meted out to the unrighteous, they will then enter heaven. This belief, known as universalism, comes in various forms but the upshot of this viewpoint is that everyone who has ever lived will eventually end up in heaven, whether they want to or not! There are numerous problems with this view, not the least of which the Scripture teach that the punishment of the wicked will be everlasting.

Moreover, it seems to make meaningless all the decisions that we make in this life. Indeed, if everyone will end up in heaven, then why offer them salvation from sin? Why bother preaching to anyone? In fact, there would be no urgency whatsoever. But this is not the message of the Bible.

Indeed, the Bible could not be more clear on subject of the destiny of human beings. Everyone will be raised from the dead, judged, and then sent to one of two eternal destinations, heaven or hell. For those in hell, there is no escape, no second chance, no hope. This is why we preach the gospel, the good news that hell can be avoided.

In sum, the doctrine of universalism is completely contradictory to God's Word, as well as giving false hope to the lost. It should never be taught!

Question 49

What Observations And Conclusions Can We Make About The Subject Of Hell?

After looking at the difficult subject of the ultimate destiny of the wicked, hell, the lake of fire, we can make some general observations and conclusions. They are as follows.

Observation 1: The Subject Of Hell Is Difficult

As we have seen, the entire subject of hell is difficult for everyone. Nobody likes to think of the idea of eternal punishment for the wicked. Therefore, most people choose to ignore the subject. This includes Bible-believing Christians. However, though difficult, hell is a subject which is found in the Word of God. Hence, it must be dealt with.

Observation 2: We Must Go To The Bible Alone For Answers

While many responses that people have to the idea of hell come from their own emotions, their own reasoning, or what other people may think and say about it, the only source that truly counts is the Bible.

Since the Bible is the Word of God, we must examine it, and it alone, to discover answers about hell. Indeed, because the Bible is God's divine revelation to the human race, it is the final word on every matter in which it speaks, and it certainly does have many things to say to us about hell.

Moreover, once we discover what the Bible teaches on the subject of hell, we must follow wherever the teaching leads. We have no right to ignore it, to change it, or to deny it.

Observation 3: Hell Is A Real Place

From Scripture, we discover that hell is indeed a real place. Those who have rejected the message of the God of the Bible will be sent to hell. In fact, Jesus talked more about hell than He did about heaven. There is no doubt that hell exists and that the unbelievers will go there once their life is over.

Observation 4: Hell Is Eternal Conscious Punishment

Not only is hell a real place, it is also a place of conscious punishment for the wicked. Furthermore, this punishment will last eternally. This is what the Bible teaches on the subject.

Understandably, an eternal hell is difficult for those who believe in a God of love, yet the God of love is also a God of justice, and of righteousness. He has made a way, through Jesus Christ, where sinners can be saved from the punishment of hell.

Observation 5: Alternatives Such As Annihilationism And Universalism Do Not Fit The Biblical Facts

Since the Bible teaches the eternal punishment of the wicked, the various alternatives such as annihilationism, or conditionalism, as well as universalism are not in accord with the biblical facts. Consequently, they should be rejected. Indeed, there is no second chance, no end to the punishment for unbelievers.

Observation 6: We Must Proclaim The Message That Human Beings Can Be Saved From Hell

The Bible teaches that hell, the lake of fire, is real. In fact, it is a place of everlasting punishment where all unbelievers will eventually go. Consequently, it is important that Christians preach the message that people can be saved from this place.

Indeed, Jesus Christ came into the world to be its Savior. He came “to seek and to save the lost.” Though we are all guilty before God, Christ offers salvation and forgiveness of sin to all those who place their faith in Him. Nothing says it better than this verse:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 NIV).

The choice is ours.

**Summary To Question 48
What Observations And Conclusions
Can We Make About The Subject Of Hell?**

The subject of hell is difficult. Nobody denies this. Yet because hell is taught in the Bible, the Word of God, it is important that we do not ignore it.

Therefore, to find answers on the subject of hell, we must go to the only source that speaks authoritatively about it, the Bible. When we look at what the Bible says about hell, we find that it is talking about a real place where unbelievers will go after their life is over. The judgment of hell consists of everlasting punishment for the wicked. There is no getting around this. Alternative attempts such as believing the wicked dead will eventually be annihilated, or that everyone will ultimately end up in heaven, do not fit the biblical facts. Hell is the place of no return. With this in mind, we need to proclaim the message that there is a way where people can escape the punishment of hell, as well as receive the blessings of being in the presence of God for all eternity. This is accomplished by trusting Jesus Christ as their Savior.

To sum up, there are only two destinies to which humans will face, heaven with the Lord, or hell, the lake of fire, without Him. Ultimately, the choice as to where we will spend eternity is up to us.

Appendix 1

What Did The Jewish Religious Leaders At The Time Of Jesus Believe About Eternal Punishment?

According to the first century Jewish writer Flavius Josephus, the religious leaders at the time of Jesus, the Pharisees, believed in the everlasting punishment of the wicked. He wrote the following about their particular beliefs:

Every soul is imperishable, but that only those of the righteous pass into another body, while those of the wicked are, on the contrary, punished with eternal torment (Josephus Wars of the Jews, 2.8.14).

They hold the belief that an immortal strength belongs to souls, and that there are beneath the earth punishments and rewards for those who in life devoted themselves to virtue or vileness, and that eternal imprisonment is appointed for the latter, but the possibility of returning to life for the former (Josephus Antiquities 18.1.3)

This is an important fact in our desire to determine the biblical viewpoint on the eternal fate of the unbeliever, seeing that we have Jesus talking about eternal punishment in the presence of these religious rulers.

Like the extent of the Hebrew Scripture, there were certain things which the Pharisees had in common with the teachings of Jesus. One of them was the belief in the everlasting punishment of the wicked. Jesus agreed with their perspective on this subject. In fact, He warned them about their eternal destiny!

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are (Matthew 23:15 NIV).

Jesus believed, as the Pharisees did, that unbelievers would end up in hell. In fact, the Lord put many of these religious leaders in that category!

Jesus then repeated His warning to them:

You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell (Matthew 23:33 NIV).

Simply put, if the view of the religious leaders with respect to the eternal punishment of the wicked was wrong, why did Jesus seemingly acknowledge it? Why didn't He correct them? Why did the Lord warn them about the possibility of their eternal condemnation while He was in their presence?

Inadequate Arguments Given By Those Who Reject Jesus' Teaching On Hell

There are a number of inadequate responses that have been given to these facts.

Argument 1: Jesus Accommodated Himself To Their Teachings

Some have actually claimed that Jesus went along with their idea of hell even though He didn't believe it Himself! In other words, while He believed differently than the Pharisees about what would happen to the unrighteous dead, for whatever reason, the Lord did not dispute their belief. He simply did not correct their error.

Response: Jesus Always Corrected Error

This argument does not work for many reasons. To begin with, we find that Jesus always corrected error when He found it. In fact, Jesus denounced the religious leaders for adding to the Word of God with their empty traditions. For example, Jesus said the following to these religious leaders:

Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules (Matthew 15:6-9 NIV).

As we see time and time again, Jesus had no problem confronting false belief. They were adding to God's revealed Word through their human-made traditions and Jesus rebuked them for it.

In another example, we read in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus contrasted His views with the popular ones at the time:

"You have heard that it was said to an older generation, 'Do not murder,' and 'whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.' But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says 'Fool' will be sent to fiery hell (Matthew 5:21,22 NET).

Again we find that Jesus had no problem whatsoever correcting or clarifying the popular beliefs of His day. Furthermore, this type of argument is reasoning in a circle. How do we know that Jesus actually did not hold the same view of hell when He clearly taught it? Why should we assume that He held a different view?

Argument 2: Jesus' Words Are Not To Be Understood Literally

Others, while admitting Jesus spoke in this manner to the religious rulers, argue that His words were not meant to be taken at face value. In other

words, they were merely symbolic of the idea that the Lord would someday judge the wicked. However, Christ was not attempting to give us any specific details of that coming punishment in the various statements that He made.

Response: This Causes More Problems Than It Solves

Again, this is reasoning in a circle. Why, one might ask, should we not take His words literally about the punishment of those in the afterlife? Is there anything in these passages to cause us to believe that they are merely symbolic of something else? The answer is no, there is not.

If the many specific details that the Lord gave are not to be understood literally, then it seems to follow that He was misleading us by giving so many particulars about the conditions in the afterlife. Does any Christian really want to conclude this? Unfortunately, many of them unwittingly do this by claiming that Jesus' never wanted us to take at face value the details He gave about the afterlife.

Furthermore, if we are not to take these statements literally about the intermediate state of the dead, as in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, as well as the statements about the future conditions in hell, then that opens the door to interpret so many other statements of Jesus in a non-literal manner.

For example, should we understand Christ literally when He says He is coming again? Should we take His words at face value that say that He will judge the living and the dead? As can be seen, this leads to all sorts of problems.

In sum, Jesus would have rebuked the belief of the Pharisees, in the everlasting punishment of the wicked, if He thought they were teaching something contrary to the Word of God. But He did not. In fact, the Lord taught these same things Himself, and He applied it to many of them!

Consequently, we have solid evidence that Jesus believed as they did about the destiny of the wicked; they will suffer everlasting punishment. Unfortunately for some of the Pharisees, Jesus said they would end up in hell because of their rejection of the clear teaching of the Word of God.

**Summary To Appendix 1
What Did The Jewish Religious Leaders
At The Time Of Jesus Believe About Eternal Punishment?**

The Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders at the time of Jesus, had the same view of the eternal punishment of the wicked as did Jesus. We can determine this in a number of ways.

To begin with, first century Jewish writer Flavius Josephus stated the Pharisees believed in the everlasting punishment of the wicked. They taught that there was conscious punishment in the afterlife.

When Jesus spoke in the midst of these religious leaders about the doctrine of everlasting punishment, there is nothing recorded that He opposed the idea. In fact, He emphasized that this would indeed be the destiny of the wicked, including some of them!

Therefore, Jesus and these religious leaders were on common ground in the belief of a future punishment in the afterlife for the unrighteous. Indeed, the fact that they did not debate Him on this issue, when He taught it, is further indication of the common belief.

There are those who attempt to say that Jesus merely accommodated Himself to the beliefs of His day without really personally embracing them. However, this does not work on two levels.

First, how do we know that Jesus did not believe the same thing as the Jewish religious leaders? Everything He said and did was consistent with His belief in the future punishment of the wicked.

Moreover, we consistently find Jesus rebuking the religious leaders about many of their beliefs and practices. In other words, we never find Him accommodating Himself to their beliefs even though He personally rejected them.

Some people contend that Jesus did not mean to give us any details about the afterlife when the Lord spoke of future punishment. In other words, His statements were meant to be understood symbolically, not literally. Therefore, we are wrong to find specific details about the afterlife in His various teachings.

The problems with arguing this way are numerous. For one thing, how do we know that He wasn't giving us any specific details about the destiny of the wicked? In other words, on what basis do we assume that the specifics details are not to be understood at face value?

In addition, if the details the Lord gave are not the actual conditions in the afterlife, as some suppose, then are we to conclude that He is misleading us by what He said? Seemingly, this is the logical conclusion of those who tell us to ignore any specifics He gave about the next world. Hopefully, there is no Bible-believer that would want to claim that!

There is even a bigger problem for those who hold this perspective. Simply put, if we are going to interpret these statements of Jesus symbolically, then why shouldn't we do the same with other statements He made about the afterlife?

Why interpret literally Jesus' statements about the existence of heaven? Why take at face value the statements of Jesus about Him returning to earth and setting up His kingdom? In fact, why should we believe He is even coming again to the earth?

Therein lies the problem. Once we start claiming that Jesus never meant what He said, then basically we take all of the authority away from Him.

Instead, our goal should be to let Him tell us what He meant. It is not for us to pick and choose which statements of Jesus we want to take at face value, while making others symbolic, or non-literal. This is especially true when He warns us of the horrific destiny awaiting the unrighteous, as well as explaining the temporary state of the wicked dead as He did in the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

To sum up, all the facts lead us to believe that Jesus did indeed hold to the doctrine of the everlasting punishment of the wicked; the same belief as the Pharisees in His day. Indeed, there is no evidence anywhere from His teachings that we should believe otherwise.

Appendix 2

What Did The Early Church Believe About Everlasting Punishment?

We have found that Jesus, as well as the religious leaders of His day, the Pharisees, each taught the doctrine of the everlasting punishment of the wicked. But what about the early Christians? Did they understand Jesus to have taught that the wicked will be punished eternally?

The answer is an unqualified, “Yes.” The early church overwhelmingly believed in the eternal punishment of the wicked. We will cite just a few examples from the writings of the early Christians, as well as the testimony of those who were about to be martyred.

Sylvanus The Son Of Felicitas (Died A.D. 150)

Sylvanus, the son of Felicitas, gave the following answer to a judge when he was on trial for his life:

If we fear a passing destruction, we shall incur eternal punishment. Knowing then, what rewards are prepared for the righteous, and what punishments appointed for sinners, we fearlessly despise human law, to keep the Divine commands. For they who adore demons will be with them in destruction and in everlasting burning.

Here he equates “destruction” with everlasting burning. This account is amazing in that he was one of the seven sons of Felicitas who were all martyred, along with their mother, for their faith in Jesus Christ.

Second Clement A.D. 150

Second Clement was written approximately A.D. 150. Although it is called Second Clement, the work is actually an anonymous sermon, a commentary which follows the reading of Scripture. It says the following about the fate of the wicked:

If we do the will of Christ, we shall obtain rest; but if not, if we neglect his commandments, nothing will rescue us from eternal punishment (Second Clement 5:5).

The writer speaks of eternal punishment. Later we read these words about future of the wicked in the afterlife:

But when they see how those who have sinned and who have denied Jesus by their words or by their deeds are punished with terrible torture in unquenchable fire, the righteous, who have done good, and who have endured tortures and have hated the luxuries of life, will give glory to their God saying, There shall be hope for him that has served God with all his heart! (Second Clement, 17:7).

In this instance, he speaks of terrible torture and unquenchable fire that awaits the unrighteous.

Polycarp (Died A.D. 155)

Polycarp, who was the Bishop of Smyrna, as well as a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote the following about threats on his life:

You threaten me with fire that burns for one hour and then cools, not knowing the judgment to come, nor the perpetual torment of eternal fire to the ungodly (Polycarp Letter to the church at Smyrna, Chapter 11)

What is important about Polycarp's testimony is that he was a disciple of the Apostle John. This would give him a direct link with one who actually heard the teachings of Jesus. It is obvious that he believed eternity consisted of perpetual torment.

Justin Martyr (Died A.D. 165)

Justin Martyr was an early church father. He had the following to say about everlasting punishment:

For among us the prince of the wicked spirits is called the serpent, and Satan, and the devil, as you can learn by looking into our writings. And that he would be sent into the fire with his host, and the men who follow him, and would be punished for an endless duration, Christ foretold (The First Apology of Justin, Chapter 28)

The punishment for the wicked is for an endless duration according to Justin.

Tertullian (Ca. A.D. 155/160-225)

The early church father Tertullian wrote about the unending punishment of the wicked:

After the present age is ended he will judge his worshipers for a reward of eternal life and the godless for a fire equally perpetual and unending (Apology 18:3).

Fire will be perpetual and unending according to this early church father.

In the 19th century, Hebrew professor Edward Pusey collected the testimony of many of the martyrs of the early church. In a section entitled, "Testimony of Martyrs to the Belief of Everlasting Punishment," he wrote the following:

The sayings of the Martyrs, bearing upon everlasting punishment, are the more remarkable, because the martyrs were of every class. The sayings then attest the faith of all classes. There were Bishops among them . . . But besides the Bishops, there were boys and girls; men and

women of noble birth and men living by their business; matrons and widows with abundance of this world's goods . . . women, aforetime unhappily notorious for their evil lives, or virgins devoted to Christ; men of gentle birth who had been popular as magicians, veteran soldiers. Every nation, Latin, Greek, West African, Egyptian, Goth, Persian, had its witnesses to Christ among the noble army of martyrs. (Edward Pusey, *What is of Faith as to Everlasting Punishment*, James Parker & Company, Oxford, Third Edition, 1880, p. 154).

We find that these early church martyrs, from every conceivable background, testified to the belief that the wicked would be consigned to hell facing an everlasting conscious punishment.

While these facts alone do not make the doctrine of the everlasting punishment of the wicked true, it must be asked as to why those who knew the apostles, as well as those who came immediately after them, held to this belief. There was obviously some reason as to why they held it.

The Doctrine Of Annihilationism Enters

It seems that the first Christian figure who made a written denial of the everlasting punishment of the wicked was a fourth-century man named Arnobius of Sicca. He wrote a book called *Adversus Nationes* in which he advocated the doctrine of annihilationism. However, his teaching on the subject was not accepted by the church.

In fact, the doctrine of annihilationism was condemned by the Second Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553) as well as the Fifth Lateran Council (A.D. 1513). It wasn't until the 19th century that a number of writings supporting annihilationism began to appear. Consequently, this belief has never gained much traction in the history of the church until relatively recently.

Importance Of The Testimony Of The Early Church

As was true with the Jewish religious leaders at the time of Jesus, the Pharisees, the overwhelming consensus in the early church was the belief that there was to be a final judgment of the wicked. This consisted of everlasting conscious punishment for the unrighteous. In other words, those who did not go to heaven will suffer eternally and consciously in hell. Nobody will be annihilated, to cease to exist.

In sum, at the time of Christ, the Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, believed in the everlasting punishment of the wicked. We also find this to be true of the great majority of the early church, those who lived after the time of Jesus and His apostles. All of this is highly instructive. Indeed, it is consistent with what Jesus taught about the subject in front of the religious leaders as well as to His own disciples.

Since this is where the evidence leads us, it creates a dilemma for those who believe the Scripture teach the eventual annihilation of the lost. Are we to assume that these Jewish religious leaders, the strict upholders of the Law

of Moses, misunderstood the Old Testament teaching, as well as the great majority of the people in the early church, who also misunderstood the teaching of Jesus?

Then, it was not until the fourth century when a certain man named Arnobius, whose teachings were condemned as heretical, was really the first to put in writing the truth about what Jesus taught. Is this really believable?

It seems the simplest answer is that the doctrine of the everlasting punishment of the wicked was taught in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as by Jesus and His apostles. This is why the Pharisees, Jesus, and the majority of the people in the early church were all in agreement about the destiny of the wicked in the afterlife.

**Summary To Appendix 2
What Did The Early Church Believe
About Everlasting Punishment?**

We learn a number of things about the doctrine of hell from the writings of the early Christians.

To begin with, as far as well can tell, for the first three hundred years, almost every orthodox Christian believer accepted the fact that hell was eternal, it was everlasting conscious punishment. At the very least, nobody clearly stated otherwise in their writings. There are a number of examples that this was the case.

In fact, it was not until the fourth century that a Christian writer advocated the doctrine of the annihilation of the wicked. But this was not accepted by the Christians of that day, or at any time later. We find that later church councils, in A.D. 553 and A.D. 1513, condemned the doctrine of annihilation as heresy.

Consequently, if Jesus did not teach the eternal punishment of the wicked then why would we find those in the early church consistently teaching it? Indeed, believers from all walks of life embraced this view.

Are we to assume that they all misunderstood Christ? Should we seriously believe it took some three hundred years for someone to finally get the doctrine of hell right; to finally conform to what the Lord really taught?

For those who reject the biblical view of everlasting punishment, as well as the consistent teaching of the early church on the subject, these questions must be answered.

The simplest answer is that the early church did not misunderstand Jesus. Indeed, those who chose to reject the doctrine of eternal punishment were doing it against the teachings of Jesus, His apostles and the believers who immediately followed the New Testament period.

Appendix 3

Did Jesus Go To Hell For Three Days After He Died? (The Apostles' Creed)

One of the most often-asked questions about Jesus Christ concerns what happened to Him immediately after His death. One answer given is found in the Apostles' Creed where there is a line that speaks of Him "descending into hell," or as the Latin puts it, the *descensus ad inferos*. Is this what took place? Did Jesus go to hell for three days after His death?

What Is The Apostles' Creed

To begin with, it is necessary that we understand what is meant by a "creed." The word creed comes from the Latin word "credo," meaning, "I believe." Simply put, the Apostles' Creed is a summary statement of basic Christian beliefs. It is called the Apostles' Creed because it is alleged to have been formulated by the apostles or soon thereafter.

The section of the Apostles' Creed, in which we are interested, reads as follows:

[Jesus] Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried:
He descended into hell

The line which reads, "descended into hell" is the one that has caused the controversy as well as much discussion.

Jesus Was In The Heart Of The Earth

Did Jesus go to hell? We are told that He was in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. The Bible says the following:

But he [Jesus] answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights" (Matthew 12:39,40 NET).

Many people believe that the Bible teaches that hell is located in the heart of the earth. Therefore, it is argued that Jesus descended to hell for those three days after His death, agreeing with statement found in the Apostles' Creed. Is this what we should conclude?

Initially, the "descent into hell" answered two basic theological questions that were troubling the early Christians.

First, how could the Old Testament believers be redeemed by Jesus Christ, seeing that they lived before his time?

Second, where was Jesus, and what was He doing between the time of His death and resurrection. The idea of the Lord descending into hell answered those questions.

Later, in the history of the church, 1 Peter 3:18-20 was used as a biblical basis to further support the belief of Jesus descending to hell:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built (1 Peter 3:18-20 NIV).

This passage, which says Jesus preached to the imprisoned spirits, has given some people a biblical justification for the descent of Christ into hell.

This Led To Many Interpretations

As can be imagined, this statement found in the Apostles' Creed has led to many interpretations, as well as many questions, of what happened to Jesus after His death but before His resurrection.

Indeed, if He went to hell, then what did the Lord do there? Did He suffer? Did He preach to the occupants? If so, what message did Jesus preach? These, as well as other questions, have been asked and answered by those who believe that Jesus literally descended into hell after His death.

Yet, this is not what the Bible teaches!

There's No Evidence The Creed Was Written By The Apostles

Several things need to be said about the creed. First, there is no evidence that this creed was written by the apostles. None whatsoever. So we cannot truly call this the Apostles' Creed.

It Was Originally A Baptismal Confession

Add to this, when Christians first recited this "creed," it was not as a written statement of their belief, rather it was a baptismal confession. In other words, believers would recite these words when they submitted to water baptism.

Furthermore, the words of the creed, "descended into hell" were not set in stone at the beginning. For example, the oldest existing version comes from A.D. 337 from Bishop Marcellus of Ancyra. Interestingly, it does not contain the clause about Jesus descending into hell. This particular version is often called, "The Old Roman Form."

As far as we are able to tell, the clause about Jesus' descent first appeared in what is known as the "Dated Creed." This creed, which came from the

East in A.D. 359, was rejected by the Eastern Church because of some heretical teachings.

The first mention of our Lord's descent into hell in the West is found in the writings of a man named Rufinus of Aquileia (around A.D. 400). Eventually, the Latin church officially put the statement into its creed around A.D. 750.

To sum up, not only was this so-called creed not written by the apostles, the line about Jesus descending into hell was not in the original baptismal formula that was recited by the early believers.

Jesus Did Not Go To Hell

However, no matter what the creed says, or does not say, there is a point that must be made very clear: Jesus did not go to hell after His death on the cross! Today, when we speak of hell, we are referring to the place where the wicked are sent after the Last Judgment. It is also known as the “lake of fire.”

English Translations And Hell

However, in many ancient English translations, such as the King James Bible, they use the word hell to translate a number of different terms with different meanings. In other words, “hell” is not merely used to indicate what we today call hell.

In fact, in the *King James Version*, the word “hell” is used for the grave, for the unseen realm of the dead, as well as for the in-between state between this life and the resurrection of the dead. These are all different concepts with different meanings, but unfortunately, the one word “hell” was used for all of them.

Therefore, when we read in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus descended into hell, it merely means that He went to the grave, that He actually died. Nothing more. He did not suffer, He was not punished, and He did not preach to the unbelievers there.

Hell Is Presently Unoccupied

Moreover, the place that we speak of as hell, Gehenna or the lake of fire, is not presently occupied. It will remain unoccupied until the Second Coming Of Christ when the Beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire. The rest of the dead will not occupy hell until after the Last Judgment, which takes place one thousand years after the Second Coming of Christ (Revelation 20:10-15).

Where Then Did Jesus Go?

If Jesus did not go to hell for the three days after His death, then where did He go? The Bible clearly states that Jesus went to the presence of the Father while His body was still in the tomb. In fact, He promised the criminal that

died next to Him on the cross that they would be together in paradise that day. We read about this in Luke:

Then he [the criminal] said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42,43 NIV).

We know from other passages of Scripture that paradise is to be equated with the presence of the Lord, the third heaven:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell (2 Corinthians 12:2-4 NIV).

Since paradise is another term for heaven, Jesus was promising the criminal who died next to Him that they would be immediately in heaven upon their death. This is also consistent with the last words of Jesus:

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last (Luke 23:46 NIV).

The Son went to be with the Father.

Consequently, the idea that Jesus went “to hell” for the three days after His death is not a biblical teaching. Jesus went to the wonderful presence of God the Father the moment He breathed His last breath here upon the earth.

Summary To Appendix 3 Did Jesus Go To Hell For Three Days After He Died? (The Apostles Creed)

One popular view of what happened to Jesus after His death is derived from the Apostles’ Creed. There is a line in the creed that says that Jesus died and then “descended into hell.” From this statement, many different theories have emerged. However, the Bible does not teach that Jesus went to hell after His death.

The Apostles’ Creed is a belief statement, a summary of Christian beliefs. It is supposedly derived from the apostles themselves. Yet there is no evidence that this is the case. In fact, it seems to originally have been a confession which believers would make at their baptism, rather than a written statement of belief.

In addition, the way in which this one line is worded, that Jesus descended into hell, is contrary to the teaching of the Word of God. Jesus did not go to hell upon His death!

Add to this, the fact that this line about Jesus descending into hell does not appear in the earliest copies of the creed.

We also need to emphasize that the word translated “hell” in the creed conveys the wrong idea. In older English, the word hell was used for a number of different concepts including the grave, the unseen realm of the dead, as well as the in-between state of the deceased before their resurrection from the dead. In other words, it does not exclusively refer to the place where the wicked go after the last judgment. However, in our day, this is what it has come to mean.

In addition, hell, the lake of fire, is presently unoccupied. In fact, nobody will be sent there until the time Christ comes again.

Furthermore, Jesus did not descend “into hell” after His death! Instead, the Bible clearly teaches that He went to paradise, to heaven. In other words, He was immediately in the loving presence of God the Father the moment He died.

Consequently, contrary to what some teach, He did not go to hell to preach to the captives, neither did He suffer in hell for three days.

Therefore, this creedal statement should not be understood to mean that Jesus went to hell for three days after His death. It is not what it is saying, and it is not what the Bible is saying either.

Appendix 4

Why Did Jesus Tell Mary Magdalene Not To Touch Him Because He Had Not Yet Ascended To The Father? (John 20:17) Is It Because He Had Descended Into Hell And Had Not Yet Been Back In His Father's Presence?

There is a statement that Christ made to Mary Magdalene on the day of His resurrection that has caused people to come up with many different interpretations as to what it means. The King James Version puts it this way:

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God (John 20:17 KJV).

Many questions have arisen from these words. Why didn't Jesus want Mary to touch him? Why did Christ say that He had not yet ascended to God the Father? Is it because He had descended into hell immediately upon His death and had not yet returned to God the Father? Did Jesus have to see the Father first before anyone could touch Him?

While there have been many elaborate explanations as to why Jesus did not want Mary to "touch Him," the supposed difficulties found in this verse can be easily cleared up.

Jesus Allowed People To Touch Him After His Resurrection

First, Jesus was not telling Mary that He could not be touched. In fact, in Matthew's account of the resurrection, we are told some of the women who saw the risen Christ, held Him by His feet:

And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him (Matthew 28:9 ESV).

Therefore, we can rule out the idea that Jesus could not be touched by people immediately after His resurrection because He had just returned from Hades, the unseen realm of the dead, and had not yet appeared before His Father in heaven.

In fact, later that evening, when Jesus appeared to His disciples in the Upper Room, He invited them to touch Him:

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have (Luke 24:39 ESV).

Then what exactly was Jesus telling Mary Magdalene? Why wasn't she allowed to touch Him?

Modern translations clear up the difficulty. For example, the New International Version, reads:

Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17 NIV)

It is not that Jesus was rebuking Mary for merely touching Him, it seems she was holding on to Him and not letting go!

He Would Not Immediately Ascend To Heaven

Why did Jesus tell her that He had not yet ascended to the Father? While there have been many diverse interpretations about what He meant, the simplest explanation is as follows: Jesus was not going immediately to be with God the Father, so she did not have to keep clinging to Him. In other words, He would be around for a while longer.

Indeed, we are told later in the Book of Acts that Jesus appeared to His disciples over and over again during a forty-day period:

After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3 NIV).

In fact, the New Testament lists ten separate appearances of the resurrected Christ. Therefore, Mary could let go of Him on Easter Sunday because He was not leaving our world just yet. In reality, the Lord would be appearing to her, and the disciples, off and on for the next forty days.

Jesus Did Not Descend Into Hell

And one final thing, Jesus did not descend into hell upon His death on the cross. Indeed, He told the criminal next to Him on the cross that they both would be in paradise that day. The Bible records their dialogue as follows:

Then he [the criminal] said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42,43 NIV).

As we have noted, paradise is another word for heaven, the presence of the Lord. Therefore, Jesus did not go to hell, or the unseen realm of the wicked dead, when He died, but rather went immediately to be with God the Father.

Consequently, there is no need to come up with elaborate explanations as to what Jesus meant when He told Mary Magdalene not to hold on to Him when she encountered Him at the tomb on that first Easter. The Lord was simply telling her that He would still be with His disciples for a period of time so there was no need to keep on holding Him. She, and they, would see the risen Christ again and again.

Summary To Appendix 4

Why Did Jesus Tell Mary Magdalene Not To Touch Him Because He Had Not Yet Ascended To The Father? (John 20:17) Is It Because He Had Descended Into Hell And Had Not Yet Been Back In His Father's Presence?

A statement of Jesus, recorded by John, has caused many needless elaborate explanations about Jesus whereabouts from the time of His death, until the time of His resurrection, as well as why He could not be touched immediately after His return from the dead.

The King James Version has Him saying, “Do not touch me because I have not yet ascended to My Father.” This has caused some to believe that Jesus needed to go first to God the Father after His resurrection seeing that He had been in Hades, the realm of the dead for three days. In other words, before humans could touch Him, for some reason, He first needed to appear before the Father in heaven.

The simple fact is that Jesus did not tell Mary not to touch Him. Rather He was telling her to stop holding on to Him. Though she did not want to let go of Him, Christ was not leaving her and His disciples just yet. In fact, He would be around for forty days, appearing to them at various times and places. Therefore, there was no need for her to keep clinging on to Him.

Furthermore, we find that Jesus had allowed another group of women to touch Him on that same Easter morning. Therefore, Christ was not forbidding Mary to touch Him during that encounter. Later that night, in the upper room when Jesus appeared to His disciples, He invited them to touch His resurrected body.

To sum up, Jesus was merely telling Mary that there was no need for her to keep holding on to Him. Why? It is because He would be back and forth with, she and Jesus’ disciples for a good period of time. In other words, this was not the last time she would see Him.

Appendix 5

Do 1 Peter 3:18-20 And 1 Peter 4:6 Teach That The Gospel Was Preached To The Dead In Hades? Does This Mean The Dead Have A Chance To Believe And Escape Hell?

Is there any heavenly hope for people who have died apart from Jesus Christ? Will anyone have a chance to believe in Him after their death and therefore escape hell as their eternal destiny?

What does the Bible say about this?

There is the viewpoint that people will still have a chance to believe in Jesus Christ even though they have died in a state of unbelief. Appeal to Scripture is usually made by those who believe there is the chance to hear the gospel in the intermediate state, the time between the death of that individual, and their eventual judgment in the presence of the Lord. The passages most often cited to support this contention are found in First Peter 3:18-20 and First Peter 4:6.

1 Peter 3:18-20

The first passage which is usually cited to promote this idea is First Peter 3:18-20. In this text, Peter wrote that Jesus Christ preached to the spirits in prison. He put it this way:

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God, after being put to death in the fleshly realm but made alive in the spiritual realm. In that state He also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison who in the past were disobedient, when God patiently waited in the days of Noah while an ark was being prepared. In it a few — that is, eight people — were saved through water (1 Peter 3:18-20 CSB).

Jesus, in His disembodied state, went to unseen realm of the dead, Hades, and preached to those unbelievers who were imprisoned there.

Ephesians 4:9 Is Also Appealed To As Support

Some Bible students who embrace this view will connect this passage with Ephesians 4:9. It reads as follows:

But what does “He ascended” mean except that He descended to the lower parts of the earth? (Ephesians 4:9 CSB)

This, they argue, gives further support of Jesus going to those in netherworld, the realm of the dead, and evangelizing those who died in unbelief. Indeed, this passage specifically says that Jesus went to the “lower parts of the earth.”

The Apostles' Creed Is Said To Confirm This

In addition, some also cite the words of the Apostles' Creed which states that Christ "descended into hell" as further proof that the unbelieving dead were evangelized after Jesus' death but before His resurrection.

The Spirits Are The Unbelieving Dead Waiting For Final Judgment

In sum, those who hold to this view believe the spirits in prison are the unbelieving dead who have not yet appeared before the Lord in judgment. While they have died in a state of sin, which has separated them from the God of Scripture, they have not yet been judged by Him. Before they are judged and condemned, they will have a chance to respond to the gospel message.

The Identity Of Those Who Will Hear

Usually, though not always, it is contended that these are the people who have never heard the message about the God of Scripture. Jesus Christ will come and personally speak to them. It will be their first chance to believe.

In other words, it will not be a second chance for those who have rejected Christ, but rather a chance for those who have never heard the first time around to decide whether or not to believe in Christ.

Others argue that everyone in the realm of the unbelieving dead will get a chance to believe. This will take place before the final judgment where all the unbelievers are condemned. In other words, some will escape condemnation with this chance to believe.

Whatever the case may be, the point is this: when Peter speaks of Christ preaching to these spirits, it is argued that He is preaching the good news of forgiveness of sin. Why else, it is asked, that Christ would preach to these people if not to encourage them to repent?

1 Peter 4:6 Teaches The Same Thing

Later in his letter, Peter then confirms what he had written earlier about Christ preaching to the dead. Indeed, he is very specific, the good news was preached to the dead. He wrote:

For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does (1 Peter 4:6 NIV).

The New Living Translation translates it as follows:

That is why the Good News was preached even to those who have died--so that although their bodies were punished with death, they could still live in the spirit as God does (1 Peter 4:6 NLT).

These passages are understood to mean that, in the past Jesus Christ, has gone to the realm of the wicked dead and preached the good news of salvation to the lost.

If this is the case, then these people had a chance to believe before they appeared before the Lord at the Last Judgment.

Furthermore, if He has done this in the past, there seems to be every reason to assume that the Lord will do it again in the future for all of those who find themselves in the same situation.

The Conclusions Drawn From These Passages

A number of conclusions from these passages have been made by those who hold this viewpoint.

Among them is that this life does not end all chances of belief for everyone. However, as we mentioned, those who hold this perspective do not agree among themselves as to whom will receive a chance to believe in the unseen realm of the dead.

Some think that everyone will be given a chance to believe before they appear before the Lord at the Last Judgment. Others restrict it to those who have not heard the gospel in this life. They argue that it is not really a second chance to believe, but rather a first chance, since these people never heard about Jesus while alive.

While there is no agreement as to which people will hear the message of Christ, all agree that at least some people will have a chance to respond to the good news, even after they have died.

Response To The Idea These Passages Speak Of Evangelizing The Dead

Contrary to those who hold to this idea, these passages in First Peter do not support the contention of a gospel preached to the dead. A number of points need to be made.

We Must Interpret Difficult Passages In Light Of Clear

There is a basic rule of Bible interpretation to which we all should pay attention: we are to interpret obscure passages in light of the clear. We should never do the reverse.

However, this is exactly what these people are doing. Indeed, they take these passages in Peter, which everyone agrees are extremely difficult to understand, and make them the control passage for interpreting all other passages. This is not the way in which Bible interpretation should be done.

This is particularly true in the interpretation of 1 Peter 3:18-20 where one commentator counted over 180 different combinations that interpreters have come up with in an attempt to discover Peter's meaning!

The Translational Issue May Help Solve The Problem

Without getting into great detail about this difficult passage, there is a technical translational issue that seems to rule out the idea that these verses are teaching that Jesus preached to those who were already dead. The New English translation brings out what the text says:

In it he went and preached to the spirits in prison, after they were disobedient long ago when God patiently waited in the days of Noah as an ark was being constructed (1 Peter 3:19,20 NET).

According to this translation, Jesus preached to these spirits “at the time they were disobedient,” *not* after they were dead. The NET Bible has the following note about why they translated the verse in this manner.

This reflects a Greek participle, literally “having been disobedient formerly,” that refers to the “spirits” in v. 19. Many translations take this as adjectival describing the spirits (“who had once been disobedient”; cf. NASB, NIV, NKJV, NLT, NRSV, TEV), but the grammatical construction strongly favors an adverbial interpretation describing the time of the preaching, as reflected above (NET Bible, note on 1 Peter 3:20).

This point of Greek grammar has also been noted by other commentators on this passage.

If this is the proper way to translate this verse, then it has nothing to do with Christ later preaching to the dead. Instead, it is emphasizing that Jesus preached through Noah during the time the ark was being constructed. These people remained disobedient despite the preaching of Noah warning them of the upcoming judgment of God.

Consequently, this verse in Peter is emphasizing that the preaching took place when these disobedient people were still alive.

The Passage In Ephesians Does Not Support Christ Preaching To The Dead

This also includes the passage in Ephesians where it is contended that Jesus went to the “lower parts of the earth.” Many modern translations do not believe that this is what the Scripture is saying. Instead, they translate the verse along this manner:

Now what is the meaning of “he ascended,” except that he also descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth (Ephesians 4:9 NET).

According to this understanding, this verse is contrasting earth from heaven with the “lower regions” being another way to say, “the earth.” Therefore, it has nothing to do with Christ going somewhere “underneath the earth.”

1 Peter 4:6 May Be Speaking Of Those Now Dead

Finally, 1 Peter 4:6 is likely referring to Christ having evangelized those people who are “now dead.” In other words, the Lord did this in the past while they were still alive. It has nothing to do with Him preaching to the deceased and offering them a chance for forgiveness before their final judgment.

Consequently, if the Bible teaches that the dead have a chance to believe in the afterlife, there must be passages which “clearly” state this. These passages certainly do not.

Belief Is Only Possible In This Life

Furthermore, there are numerous passages which state that it is in this life alone that people have a chance to believe. A number of points need to be made about what the Bible says on this subject.

All Humanity Is In A State Of Condemnation

For one thing, unbelievers are already in a state of condemnation. John wrote that unbelievers are already condemned because of their sin:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son (John 3:18 NIV).

All of us are born spiritually separated from the Lord. In other words, we are not condemned only when we die. Indeed, each and every one of us is born in a state of condemnation. Unless we believe in Jesus Christ, we will die in that state.

Furthermore, Scripture does not hold out any hope for belief beyond the grave. Indeed, there is not the slightest hint in the Bible that there is any hope for the wicked dead.

Judgment Comes After Death

The writer to the Hebrews said:

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27 NIV)

First there is death, and then there is judgment, and then there is punishment. This is the consistent biblical teaching on the subject. There is no chance to believe after death according to the Scripture.

There Is No Crossing Over Once A Person Has Died

We will again emphasize what the Bible says about those who have died. Scripture teaches that once a person is dead, their eternal destiny is fixed. There is no crossing over from one side to the next.

Jesus made this clear in His story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man, who wanted Lazarus to cross over to him, was told the following:

Besides, a wide space has been placed between us and you. So those who want to go from here to you can't go. And no one can cross over from there to us (Luke 16:26 NIV).

This statement rules out anyone having the chance to make a decision for the Lord once this life is over. The boundaries are eternally fixed. Nobody can cross from one side to the other.

All in all, these difficult passages in First Peter, and the one in Ephesians, should not be used to counteract the clear teachings found in Scripture that there is no hope whatsoever for unbelievers once this life is over.

Summary To Appendix 5

Do 1 Peter 3:18-20 And 1 Peter 4:6 Teach That The Gospel Was Preached To The Dead In Hades? Does This Mean The Dead Have A Chance To Believe And Escape Hell?

Some Christians believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ will be preached to people even after they have died. In other words, individuals will have a chance to believe in Christ, in the afterlife, before they stand in the presence of the Lord at the Last Judgment. There are a number of ways in which this idea is presented.

Often it is contended that it is only those who have never heard about Jesus in this life that will hear the message in the next life. Therefore, they would not be getting a second chance at belief, but rather a first chance. It is argued that for God to be fair, He must do this. Otherwise people who have never heard about Jesus will have been condemned for something over which they had no control, not responding to the gospel.

However, there are others who say that “everyone” who did not believe in the Lord in this life will have a chance to believe in the next. In other words, it will not be limited to those who have never heard about Jesus.

One of the passages used to support this idea is First Peter 3:18-20. This passage speaks of Christ preaching to the “spirits in prison.” This is thought to refer to those who have died without believing in Jesus. Before the final judgment, they will receive a chance to hear the gospel and then believe if they so desire.

Another passage, 1 Peter 4:6, specifically says that Christ preached to “the dead.” Since there would be no reason to preach to dead believers, it must refer to the preaching of the gospel, or good news, to unbelievers. Thus, the Bible offers hope for a chance to believe in Christ even after a person has died.

A passage in Ephesians, which says Christ descended into the lower parts of the earth, is usually cited as further support for this idea.

However, these passages teach no such thing. The passage, 1 Peter 3:18-20, that speaks of Christ preaching to the spirits in prison, is one of the most difficult in the entire New Testament to interpret. As we mentioned, Bible commentators have come up with about 180 different combinations to try to determine the meaning of these verses.

Furthermore, according to a technical rule of Greek grammar, it seems that the idea that Jesus spoke to the spirits after they were dead is not grammatically possible, or at the very least, not very probable. Instead it is saying that He preached to them “at the time” they were disobedient.

In addition, the other passage in Peter, 1 Peter 4:6, does not clearly state that Jesus preached to people when they were dead. Neither does the passage in Ephesians clearly teach that Jesus descended into the lower parts of the earth.

Consequently, we should not use these verses as the control passages by which all other verses in Scripture are understood. Indeed, there are many other verses in the Bible which speak to this topic, clear passages. These are the ones we should use to establish Christian doctrine. We should never use obscure or unclear texts.

In fact, there are numerous other places where the Bible restricts belief to this life alone. As the writer to the Hebrews made clear, after death comes judgment. Moreover, after judgment comes punishment.

In addition, in Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man was told that there was no “crossing over” from the place of the unrighteous dead to the place of the righteous dead. In other words, destinies are forever fixed in this life. There is no chance to believe in the next life.

Therefore, these difficult passages in First Peter should not be the ones by which the clear passages are interpreted. We may not be certain what these passage do mean, but when we look at the rest of Scripture, we can know what they do not mean.

Indeed, it does not mean the dead have a chance to believe at some point after they have died. This includes those who have not heard about Jesus in this life. The Bible offers no hope for belief once this life is over. None whatsoever.

Therefore, contrary to what some believe and teach, Peter does not offer the unbelieving dead any hope of hearing the good news of Christ and then believing. It will be too late for them. Indeed, it is in this life alone where this issue is settled.

About The Author

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