

## Introduction

“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.” Tertullian  
(SCREEN)

“There are very many in our day, who though not denying the Holy Scriptures, **do not** believe in endless torments.” - Augustine. (SCREEN)

- Interestingly, Augustine, who supported ECT, acknowledged that many of his peers and even predecessors did not believe punishment in hell was endless.
- My point in showing the opposition of views on the doctrine of hell by respected Christian teachers is to simply make the **point**, there is no overall congruency of belief on this subject, so we need to do some work.

## Transition

- The first message in this series, “Holy Hell?”, the first in our annual theme of Deconstruction to Reconstruction, was a foundational message about why and how we are approaching this year and controversial subjects. (Holy Hell?)
- The second message was the first of two about the main stream view of hell, ECT, of which this message is the second.
  - In the next couple of weeks, I’ll also cover Conditional Immortality / Annihilationism and Remedial Universalism.
- Part 1 of the ECT message, last Sunday, covered the first **two elements** of the motif, God’s Character, and the Scope of Redemption. (Need to catch up)
- Today, as part 2 of the ECT message, I’ll dive into the **third element** of the our evaluative motif, “**the text**,” which I felt needed its on message.

## • The Text

- Most of us have experienced a Christianity that would **appeal** to “the text” as a way of saying, “**all we need to do is go by what the word says.**”
- Yes, I’m generalizing here, but I think it is accurate and it creates **problems**.
  - Appealing to the text alone, assumes there is one clear **universal acceptance** of what the text means and is communicating.
    - And that is **absolutely** not even close to being true.

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- Regarding our English **translations**, the NT portions of them are all ultimately derived from Koine Greek, the language the NT was written in.
- The OT portions are derived from either the Hebrew Masoretic Text or the Greek Septuagint (Hebrew translated into Greek).
- There are **two** main general issues with “the text” element of the motif regarding the **ECT** doctrine of hell.
  - **1st** is what the words translated as “hell” actually mean in the NT.
  - **2nd**, is what the words describing the “eternal” nature actually means.
- **“Hell”**

There are three main Greek words translated as “hell” in the NT: Tartarus, Hades, and Gehenna. (SCREEN)

- **Tartarus** is only used once as a deep abyss for fallen angels.

2 Peter 2:4 ESV (SCREEN)

“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.”

- It is important to understand this word is **not used anywhere else** so any other uses of a word translated as hell are not the same as this one.
- **Hades** is a general Gk term for the underworld or the abode of the dead, often equated with the Hebrew *Sheol*, but not always eternal torment.
- Gehenna is the **most common** term for fiery judgment, derived from the Hebrew “Valley of Hinnom.”

Mark 9:47-48 ESV (SCREEN)

“**47** And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into **hell**, (*Gehenna*) **48** ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’”

- Any attempt to use “Gehenna” to support ECT **must acknowledge** it was a literal garbage dump outside Jerusalem where fires burned continually.

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- If you've ever seen a garbage landfill you know organic decomposition produces methane gas that is deadly when built up in volume.
  - A small flame, called a "flare or flare stack" is used to burn the methane gas slowly to prevent build up.
    - Because the danger is in the build up, the flame burns 24/7 ... in other words "is not quenched" (ESV) or "it never goes out" (NLT).
- There is **no way to prove** that a flare **did or did not** burn in Gehenna but it is very possible that it did, at least during the time of the Roman occupation due to their **engineering** advances.
  - There also may have been **multiple fires** burning at the same time to prevent trash from building up too high. (Again - Roman **engineering**)
- Gehenna was also **dumping place** for dead unclaimed bodies, executed criminals, and animal carcasses, even back to the rebellious kings of the OT, when child sacrifice was common and bodies were dumped there.
  - Due to the number of bodies and trash, one might stand over looking it and say "those **worms** will never run out of food," or "won't die."
- One more thing to note is that Jesus was referencing Isaiah, which ends with a picture of Jerusalem's restoration, God's victory over Jerusalem's enemies, the nations coming to it to praise God in Jerusalem, and the **corpses** of those who rebel against Jerusalem rotting outside the city.

#### Isaiah 66:24 ESV (SCREEN)

"And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

"In all of this, Jesus is warning of a fulfillment of prophecies: if you don't repent, the Romans will destroy this city and you will be thrown into Gehenna, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. This is not about torment of the soul but about bodies becoming an abhorrence, left to the elements in the valley outside Jerusalem, being devoured by worms and consumed by fire."

#### David B. Sloan (SCREEN)

- Whether you agree with Sloan or not really depends on **how you interpret Jesus' use of Gehenna in Scripture.** (This is **key**)

- There can be no doubt that when Jesus used this term those hearing would have known **exactly** what the literal Gehenna dump was.
- The **question** ... was Jesus referring to the result of sin in this life, which would be like being tossed into the dump, or was He using the imagery of Gehenna to *symbolically* illustrate a different eternal place of eternal fire, death, and suffering?

### Transition

- Every student of the bible has to **wrestle with that question** for themselves because the answer **shapes ones view** of the doctrine of hell.
- That is the **first** issue regarding “the text” as support for ECT, what the words translated as “**hell**” actually mean.
- The **second** is what do the words translated “**eternal**” actually mean.
  - This is just as, if not possibly more, important than the first because it deals with the **duration** of whatever it is that you believe hell is.
  - Is it forever, unending, everlasting, or is it a span of time without set ending?
  - Again due to time constraints, I’ll only focus on the word translated in English as “eternal” or “everlasting.”
- “**Eternal**”
  - The immediate and profound issue is that the Greek word *aionios*, (eye-oh-nee-os) translated “eternal,” can also mean belonging to the age to come, not necessarily “endless duration.”
    - Influential fathers like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa argued that “eternal punishment” refers to the **purpose** of divine judgment, not its **duration**.

“God’s fire is not a fire of destruction but of purification.” — Origen paraphrased  
(SCREEN)

- His view was that the **fire burns away sin, not souls**.
  - It is important, because of Origen’s influence on Christian doctrine to note that although some rejected his views later, his interpretation of “eternal” was never condemned by an ecumenical council.
- This weakness of ECT is **linguistic**:

- Our translations **may** read endless duration where Scripture may actually be describing divine purpose or quality.
- The Greek “*aionios*” (eye-oh-nee-os) is the word that is translated “eternal” every time you find it in the NT, including “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment”.
- The real issue here regarding the word “*aionios*,” is, “**does** it mean” never-ending or “**can** it mean” never-ending.
  - To be **transparent**, there are many scholars and theologians who believe “*aionios*” **can mean never-ending** but it cannot be proved that it does **mean that and that only** and so if it can mean never-ending or just a duration is a **huge issue**.
- Further, the Greeks had a word, “*aidios*,” (eye-a-dee-os) that denoted “endless” as opposed to “duration” but the writers **did not** use it except in two places in the NT and neither referenced the destiny of humans.
  - (Rom 1:20 - used to describe God and Jude 6 - used to describe the finality of the fallen angels).
  - So to describe the destiny of people, they used “*aionios*.”
- “*Aionios*” is the adjective form of “*aion*” (eye-ahn) - where we get “eon,” which means an “**age**” or “an unknown period of time.”
  - For example, if someone waiting at the DMV says, “this is going to take forever,” they don’t actually mean “forever” as in “eternal.”
    - If someone says, “dinosaurs roamed the earth for eons before vanishing,” obviously doesn’t mean they roamed “eternally.”
- *Aion*’s equivalent in Hebrew is the word “olam.” (oh-lum)
  - This word could be **poetically** used as going “into the horizon” or referring to something that is “hidden,” i.e., known only to God.
  - Gen 6:4: “Mighty men which were of old [olam].” Obviously mighty men were obviously not never-ending.
  - Gen 49:26: “The everlasting [olam] hills.” The NIV translates this verse better “the age-old hills”.
  - 1 Sam 27:8: “They were the inhabitants of the land from ancient [olam] times.” Inhabitants were not eternal.
  - Josh 24:2: “From ancient [olam] times your fathers lived beyond the River.” Their fathers did not live there eternally.

- **Is 42:14:** God says, "I have kept silent for a long [olam] time." God obviously did not keep silent forever.
- The point is not to say "olam" cannot possibly ever mean eternity, it is to acknowledge that it was clearly used most often not denoting "endless duration."

"Let me say to Bible students that we must be very careful how we use the word eternity. We have fallen into great error in our constant use of that word. There is no word in the whole book of God corresponding with our eternal, which, as commonly used among us, means absolutely without end." - G. Campbell Morgan (SCREEN)

"*Aionios* relates to the Greek 'aion', which often roughly translates the Hebrew 'olam'. Some Jews thought of there being two 'ages' – ha olam ha-zeh, the present age, and ha olam ha-ba, the age to come. *Aionios* punishment and the like would be the punishment in the age to come." - N.T. Wright (SCREEN)

#### • **Eternal Life / Death**

- Another significant question that arises concerning the duration of "aionios" - "eternal" is what about eternal life if the same word is used?
- Although as with all of this, there are multiple views, one way to consider this is that "eternal life" and "eternal punishment" could be translated as "**other-worldly life**" and "**other-worldly punishment.**"
- Meaning, not denoting endlessness, but **essence**, i.e., denoting that eternal life that has its essence in God, and what it will be in the age to come, and that eternal punishment that has its essence in God, and what it will be in the age to come.
  - Eternal life does not end, not because of the implication of the word, "*aionios*," but **rather** because it is the life in—connection with/of the essence of—the Source of life who is without beginning and end.
  - In other words, eternal life is eternal because it is God's life, not because the adjective, "*aionios*," describes without end.
  - In this way, eternal **does not** have to mean the same thing for life and death because they are opposites.

- If they are opposites, ie., that God is life and whatever is not God is death, then **is** the duration of those opposites just that ... **opposite**?
- If God who is Life is endless, then is death which is opposite of life, opposite of endless? (This is at least something worth considering.)
- To be clear I absolutely affirm God as eternal, having neither beginning nor end, that He is absolutely never-ending, but that does not require the words, “*olam* and *aiionios*” to mean eternal duration for this to be true.

## Conclusion

- I could go on and on showing you contrasting views but I'll stop and just say the presence of competing views—even among saints and teachers honored worldwide—shows that the early church and patristics did not hold a single, unified understanding of hell.
- ECT is not the only historic Christian view, nor obviously the original one.
- This leads us to an important truth regarding any discussion of hell, and that is the **ultimate Mystery of God**.
- Although we are called to intensely study and search out the scriptures in all matters, especially those regarding eternal life and death, there remains the reality that God does not explain Himself in every single possible detail.
  - We must trust that God has and always will reveal to us that which is essential, but demand faith of us in those things He chooses not to clarify fully - the Mystery of our Sovereign God.
- But even so, our **goal** in this series is ultimately to help all of us understand that we have **inverted** the Christian focus on hell and serving God.
- As I have said, we can know and love Jesus even without the doctrine of hell.
- And to that end, regardless of one's view of hell, we should all be deeply committed to sharing the love of Jesus with all, aka the “good news.”

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