

Foolish Doctrines
Lesson 4: Hell

I. Introduction:

In perhaps the most famous sermon ever preached – “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”—Jonathan Edwards passionately persuades the lost to reconsider their course. In doing so, he makes the following chilling proclamation:

It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all. You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: For "who knows the power of God's anger?"

- A. What emotions go through your mind when you read this account?
- B. Why do many people struggle with the traditional understanding of Hell?
- C. Why do many non-Christians scorn Christians for believing in the traditional understanding of Hell?

A description like this touches a nerve in many Christians. Some take heed and resolve to warn the lost about their fate. Others struggle to harmonize the idea of endless punishment with the God of love they learned about in Sunday school. Consequently, theologians, pastors, and parishioners alike have been re-evaluating Edwards’s concept of an eternal Hell. This debate has not been restricted to mainline liberal churches, but has seeped into those of the evangelical persuasion. Consider the following quote from Brian McLaren:

And I think anybody who would sit for five minutes and ponder the reality of Hell as it’s commonly understood would either—I can say, lose their minds. I think if you actually faced it and what is really being said, I think you would—any person who faced it, really open themselves up to it and the horror of it for five minutes would come out mentally damaged. And the result of that would either be that they, I think, would hate God—And I’ve met a lot of people who have this—the fundamentalists are right in their understanding of Hell and so they, as a result,

hate God. Or they become an atheist. They just say it's better to not believe in God than to have to believe in that kind of God. Or they become a raving fundamentalist who'd be grabbing people on the street and shaking them and you know, saying you better repent. Do you understand what's at stake?"

"And I think that creates a rational problem. And is that rationally sensible? Would it be—Does it make sense for a good being to create creatures who will experience infinite torture, infinite time, infinite—you know, never be numbed in their consciousness? I mean, how would you even create a universe where that sort of thing could happen? It just sounds—It really raises some questions about the goodness of God. And that, to me, is the deepest issue¹

D. Why does McLaren struggle with the idea of Hell?

E. How are we to resolve this issue?

Hell has been placed on trial, as this doctrine has been assaulted from both outside and inside evangelicalism. Thus, the goal of this study will be to survey the four most popular views, and then arrive at a biblical resolution.

II. Universalism:

A. Summary of the Position:

This is the belief that in the fullness of time all souls will be released from the penalties of sin and restored to God.² Simply put, everybody will be saved. Supporters of this position include J. A. T. Robinson and John Hick. Many will be surprised to find out that this is the most popular position among clergy in all of Christendom.

B. Support for the Position:

1. **It's the Only Solution to the Problem of Evil:** In other words, only this position answers the question, "How can evil exist in a world with an all-powerful and all-loving God?" According to adherents of this position, genuine evil does exist, but God will use it to achieve final redemption. Evil will drive people to the love of God and He will make sure that their pain will be rewarded with bliss. According to this view, the doctrine of Hell interferes with this resolution, as endless punishment offers no hope of redemption or

¹ <http://mcdanell99.xanga.com/606606206/Hell--no--brian-mclaren-and-the-doctrine-of-Hell---part-2/>

² D. B. Eller, "Universalism" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984) pg. 1128.

rehabilitation. Any hardship and suffering that does occur will be remedial in nature.

2. **Jesus' Love Tempers His Teaching:** Universalists agree that Jesus did teach about Hell, but they contend that His message of love supersedes Hell. "If we see at the heart of his [Jesus'] teaching the message of the active and sovereign divine love, we shall find incredible and even blasphemous the idea that God plans to inflict perpetual torture upon any of His children."³ Thus, all the passages on Hell must be read in light of Jesus' love, with the conclusion that Hell, along with all evil and suffering, will lead to the redemption of their souls.
3. **Paul's Teaching Rounds Out Jesus' Teaching:** The following passages seem to imply the restoration of all men:

1 Corinthians 15:22 "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."

Romans 5:18 "So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."

Romans 11:32 "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all."

1 Timothy 2:4 "...who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

From these passages universalists conclude that it would be best to temper Jesus' preaching on Hell, with Paul's instruction on universalism.

4. **Our "Inherent Gravitation Towards God."** God created us in His image, thus we have a natural fondness towards Him. Sooner or later we will all be drawn to Him.
5. **The Veracity of Many Faiths:** This inherent gravitation towards God is found in the worship of Him among many people of all religions. We all worship the same God with varying degrees of religious creativity.
6. Why is this an appealing position?
7. Can you think of any problems with this perspective?

³ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 382.

C. Biblical Evaluation:

1. **Faulty Moral Presuppositions:** Adherents of universalism consistently use a moral criterion to judge biblical truth. Statements like “A *loving* God would give His children a second chance” and “it’s inconceivable that a *loving* God would punish His children forever” presuppose certain conduct. This does not allow the Bible to define this attribute. Rather, these theologians warp and twist the Scriptures around their own personal definitions of love.
2. **Defective Interpretation of the Bible:** Why would Jesus, who taught on the importance of truthfulness, confront the lost with the “non-existent” threat of Hell? Further, why would Paul, who similarly teaches on integrity, tell his churches that people will not enter the kingdom of heaven (*1 Cor. 6:9-10*), and then assure them later that everybody’s in? This theology is built upon wishful thinking and not the clear meaning of the text.
3. **Unbiblical Conclusions:** For instance, to say that man gravitates towards God undercuts *Romans 3:10-18*’s teaching of man’s bias against God. Secondly, this reasoning elevates God’s love as the supreme attribute to which all others must submit. While the Bible does teach that God is love, it also teaches that He is holy, righteous, and just. We could just as easily force love to submit to His justice. Finally, the Bible makes it very clear that access to heaven comes exclusively through Christ (*John 14:6*), and that only those who make the decision to follow Him in the *current* lifetime escape judgment (*Heb. 9:27*).
4. **Poor Exegesis of Biblical Texts:** The following texts, when properly examined, do not support the claim that all people enter heaven.

- a. **1 Corinthians 15:22; 28** “*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. . . When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.*”

Universalists claim that this teaches the restoration of all people, yet a closer look at the context reveals that this is not the case. When Paul speaks of all in Christ being made alive, he specifically refers to believers (*vs. 23* also supports this). As we progress to *verse 28*, we note how Paul builds a case for indispensability of the resurrection as part of God’s supreme plan for the universe. At the end of the age, He will triumph over both His enemies and those who afflict His children—death and sin—putting all things under His feet and reigning forever. The phrase “putting all enemies under His feet” (*vs. 27*) implies that they are completely subdued. This does not mean that

each and every human is converted, as universalists believe, but rather that He will render His enemies powerless as they are banished to eternal punishment (*Rev. 20:10*).

- b. **Romans 5:18** “*So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.*”

The universalist will claim that this passage suggests that just as each and every person stands condemned because of Adam, each and every man is justified because of Christ. Yet, in the very next verse we read, “*For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.*” “All” and “many” are relative terms, contrasting the “one” act of Adam’s sin and the righteousness of “one” man—Jesus Christ. This contrast emphasizes the substantial impact of both Adam and Christ on the human race. Universal salvation is not even in view in this discussion. This, along with the preponderance of other Scriptures used by Paul⁴ to support eternal punishment, defeats the Universalist position.

- c. **1 Timothy 2:4** “[God our Savior]*who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*”

Universalists claim that this passage shows that it’s the will of God for each and every man to be saved. Yet this is simply not the case. In the context, Paul is imploring the brethren to pray for kings and those in authority, an idea that would have shocked many Christians living under evil rulers such as Nero, whom they considered to be beyond hope. This statement is Paul’s reminder to them that God desires to save “all kinds” of men, including kings.

III. Post-Mortem Evangelism:

A. Summary of the Position:

Robert Peterson in his excellent book Hell on Trial defines this position with the following: “The church has erred in teaching that death is a cutoff point for grace and that everlasting punishment is the destiny of the unrepentant. On the contrary, [one advocate] assures us, ‘If God really loves the whole world and desires everyone to be saved, it follows logically that everyone must have access to salvation.’ Those who

⁴ Romans 2:5; Romans 9:22-23; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

do not have sufficient access in this life will have it in the next.”⁵ Advocates of this position include Clark Pinnock.

B. Support for the Position:

1. **God’s Love:** Since God loves humanity, it would be inconceivable for Him to send them to Hell without ascertaining a response to His grace.
2. **Not everybody gets in:** Those who reject a clear presentation of the gospel in this life have their fate sealed.
3. **Biblical Example:** *1 Peter 3:19-20* speaks of Christ preaching to the spirits who are now in prison, serving as an example of post-mortem evangelism.
4. Why is this an appealing position?

C. Biblical Evaluation:

1. **Faulty Assumption of God’s Love:** Like the universal position, this position assumes that God’s love would mandate that He must do certain things and not others. Again, this projects man’s definition of God’s love upon the Bible, instead of extracting an understanding of God’s love from Scripture.
2. **Lack of Biblical Support:** *1 Peter 3:19-20* does not teach that the spirits in prison ever had the possibility of converting. Rather, Jesus proclaimed His victory to imprisoned demons, ensuring that they knew of their defeat. Further, *Hebrews 9:27* and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in *Luke 16:9-31* confirm that sinners who refused to repent in this life do not get a second chance in the life to come.

IV. Annihilationalism:

A. Summary of the Position:

In the words of one of the advocates of the position:

Let me say at the outset that I consider the concept of Hell as endless torment in the body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition which needs to be changed. How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose

⁵ Robert Peterson, *Hell on Trial* (Phillipsburg: NJ: R &R, 1995) p. 11.

*ways include everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself. Surely the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is no fiend; torturing people without end is not what our God does.*⁶

As you can see, adherents to this point of view feel strongly about defending the character of God. They contend that the idea of everlasting punishment makes God a monster. Thus, they believe that when the Bible speaks of destruction, it means just that: destruction. When the second resurrection transpires, unbelievers are judged and put out of existence forever. This view is taught by John Stott, John Wenham, Clark Pinnock, Jehovah Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists.

B. Support for the Position:

1. **The Vocabulary of Destruction:** When the Bible speaks of “perishing” or “destruction,” it alludes to being annihilated. In their mind, it would seem strange to say that those who are to suffer destruction are not in fact destroyed (cf. *Matt. 7:13-14* and *John 3:16*).
2. **The Hell-fire Imagery:** This imagery reinforces the notion that destruction equals annihilation. Fire consumes and destroys. To say that fire symbolizes pain and torment misrepresents the analogy, as the flames primarily portray obliteration, not torture.
3. **God’s Justice:** According to *Revelation 20:12*, God will punish people in accordance to what they have done. Thus, the punishment must be commensurate with the crime. Eternal punishment would be disproportionate to the sins one committed in a single lifetime.
4. **The “Universalist Passages”:** While these advocates reject universalism and the belief that everybody will be saved, they agree with the universalists’ use of certain Scriptures, consenting that they support the notion that in God’s future kingdom the unrepentant will not exist. This is not because everyone has converted, but because unconverted have been annihilated. In their mind, God’s promises of final victory and complete dominion do not reconcile with an everlasting abode of the impenitent.
5. **Conditional Immortality:** Advocates claim that the belief in the inherent immortality of the soul finds its roots in Greek Philosophy, not the Bible. Those to whom God grants eternal life will receive a new, immortal body. On

⁶ Clark H. Pinnock, “The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4.2 (1990): 246-7.

the other hand, those who reject the gospel do not receive this gift and will cease to exist.

6. How does this view navigate between the traditional view of Hell and Universalism?

C. Biblical Evaluation:

1. **The Vocabulary of Destruction: (Response)** The rebuttals to this are legion. First of all, we notice in *Revelation 20:7,10* that the beast and the false prophet abide in the lake of fire a thousand years after their judgment. Apparently, the fires of Hell work rather slowly. Second, destruction is one of five word pictures to describe Hell, and the only one that possibly supports annihilationism. The others—darkness and separation, fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, and punishment—seem to emphasize the “tormenting” aspect of Hell. Third, though many passages could teach annihilationism, these must be harmonized with those that do not. When the Bible speaks of destruction, it does not necessarily teach obliteration, but the final, hopelessly wretched and ruined state of the sinner.
2. **The Hell-fire Imagery: (Response)** Fire has multiple purposes. It can consume wood, cook food, torment prisoners, and light a room. When used in conjunction with Hell we must select the application which best suits the context. In *Matthew 25:41* we read “*Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels...’*” There are two things we notice about this fire: it is eternal, implying that its flame never runs out, and its fuel is burning forever. We read in *Revelation 14:11* that the smoke of the damned rises forever and ever. If we were to believe, as the annihilationists contend, that the damned are simply consumed, then there would be no fuel to burn. Therefore the purpose of this Hell fire is not to consume, but to torment. The testimony of the rich man being in flames (*Luke 16:23-24*), along with *Revelation 20:10* which speaks of the lost as being tormented day and night forever and ever, confirms this point.
3. **God’s Justice: (Response)** A survey of the Bible shows that many offenses which we consider to be minor infractions merit severe punishment from God. Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah (*Gen. 19:26*). Uzzah was struck dead for attempting to steady the ark (*2 Sam. 6:6-7*). Ananias and Sapphira were slain by the Spirit for telling a lie (*Acts 5:3-4*). And the entire human race was punished on account of Adam eating the forbidden fruit (*Rom. 5:15-19*). From these examples we can conclude that God indeed takes sin personally and seriously. Sins that take only a matter of seconds to commit can have consequences that last forever (i.e., murder). When we sin against God, its consequences are forever, as it brings about separation. Further, sin is an attack against an infinitely

holy God. And just like an attack against the president warrants greater punishment than an attack against an ordinary citizen, so transgressions against God merit greater punishment than those against ordinary people. The degree of suffering described in Hell only highlights God's profound hatred of sin. One final thought: People in Hell will continue to sin forever, lashing out in anger at God. Thus, God will continually punish them for all past sins as well as each additional one.

4. **The “Universalist Passages”:** **(Response)** The theology extracted from this handful of verses must harmonize with the theology derived elsewhere. Unlike the “universalist passages” which merely mention a summary statement of God's final victory, *Revelation chapters 20-22* lay out a chronology of the end of the age. *Revelation 20:11-15* describes the condemnation of the wicked in the Lake of Fire. Later, in *Revelation 21:1-8* John places a description of the Lake of Fire alongside his sketch of the New Heavens and Earth. Moving on to *Chapter 22* John highlights the bliss of the New Jerusalem and then sets it in contrast with those living “outside” and cut off from the happiness of God (*Rev. 22:15*). In the future, God will be all in all, and have His kingdom established, but from this survey of Revelation we see that the wicked still exist in the Lake of Fire in the midst of the Eternal State.
5. **Conditional Immortality:** **(Response)** Greek philosophy has nothing to do with why Christians embraced the immortality of the soul. Church fathers and modern day theologians embrace it on account of the teaching of Scripture. According to the Bible, the soul (the immaterial part of man) will be reunited with the body (*Rev. 20:11-15*), and then the body and the soul (*Matt. 10:28*) will be cast into the Lake of Fire.

V. Eternal Conscious Torment (the traditional view):

A. Summary of the Position:

Hell refers to the final abode of the damned, the Lake of Fire to which all the guilty will be sentenced after they have been resurrected for the Great White Throne Judgment. The Bible teaches that all who do not place their faith and trust in Christ during this lifetime will suffer God's wrath for eternity.

B. Biblical Support for the Position:

1. Hell is Eternal:

- a. *Mark 9:47-48* “If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into Hell, where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.”

- What do we learn about the duration of Hell from this passage?
- b. *Matthew 25:41* “**Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels’**”
- What do we learn about the duration of Hell from this passage?
- c. *Matthew 25:46* “**These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.**”
- Why is it significant that *eternal* modifies both *punishment* and *life*?
2. **Hell is a place of torment:** The authors of Scripture use five major motifs to describe the everlasting abode of the damned.
- a. **Darkness and Separation:** This speaks of eternal rejection of unbelievers by their Maker and the total exclusion from His blessed presence.
- Matthew 8:12* “**but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness.**”
- b. **Fire:** Fire signifies the horrible physical suffering which the unrighteous will endure in Hell.
- Matthew 3:12* “**His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.**”
- c. **Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth:** Hell will be a place of endless remorse and unspeakable suffering. The damned will wail in agony and grind their teeth in bitterness.
- Matthew 13:50* “**and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**”
- d. **Punishment:** Hell will be a place of final retribution where its residents will reap the consequences of their sin.

Matthew 25:46 “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

- e. **Death and Destruction:** This speaks of eternal ruin, the wretched existence to which the unrepentant will be condemned. They will be destroyed forever.

Revelation 20:14-15 “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.”

- 3. **It will be Inhabited:** Hell is not merely an idle threat or abstract construct that Jesus manufactured to get us to behave. It is a real place and a genuine possibility for those who do not repent. Thus, in a vision of the future John describes the fate of the lost.

Revelation 21:8 “But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

C. Biblical Assessment:

Clearly, the uncomfortable doctrine of eternal, conscious punishment for sin is what the Scriptures teach. To deny it is as irresponsible as a doctor ignoring clear signs of insipient cancer in his patients. We must face the sober reality of the Biblical teaching and warn people accordingly.

VI. The Logic of Hell:

One of the major objections to the doctrine of everlasting punishment is that sin is not an everlasting act. Therefore, it seems unjust of God to pour out His wrath for all of eternity on sinners who committed temporal transgressions. Here are a few responses.

- A. *The purpose of justice is to restore a sense of rightness.* In the Bible, justice is guided by the axiom “eye for eye.” This suggests that when we wrong someone, we are to feel the pain we inflicted upon them. If we wreck someone’s car we recompense them. We are to feel their loss in a personal way. In this world, some punishments are not commensurate with the crimes. For instance, how can Hitler’s suicide make up for the six million lives he murdered in the Holocaust? No earthly penalty can properly right this wrong. With sin, the true victim is an infinite and Holy God. Thus, Hell restores rightness in that the culprit experiences a taste of the victim’s pain, which in every case is God.

- B. *We will not know the depths of our sins until final judgment.* How many people would Hitler have killed had not the allied forces closed in on Berlin? How many internet pictures can satisfy a man's lustful appetite for porn? How much money can quench a woman's greedy desire? Sin is not finite. Rather our sins are expressions of bottomless desire only constrained by a Sovereign God. When sin is fully exposed we will see its boundless nature. Thus, everlasting punishment is just because it punishes boundless sin.
- C. *The one sinned against determines the severity of the punishment.* The execution style murder of an eight month old baby is worse than the homicide of a gang member. Both are deplorable, but the murder of the baby is more severe on account of the innocence of the victim. In the same way, a sin against God is infinitely offensive because of the virtue, importance, and glory of God. Thus, everlasting punishment is just given the glory of the person wronged.
- D. *Sin against God is a qualitative transgression in that it alters our relationship with Him forever.* Created in the image of God, the Lord intends for us to have a relationship with Him. When we sin, we reject such a relationship. And the consequences of this action, goes on forever in the form of everlasting punishment.
- E. What does everlasting punishment demonstrate about how seriously God takes sin?

VII. Thought Questions:

- A. In *Genesis 3:4-5* we read:

The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die!"⁵ "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Why do you suppose God's judgment is the first doctrine denied in the Bible?

- B. Is it possible to be a Christian and deny Hell?
- C. Why does God give such an explicit description of Hell?

D. How should the reality of Hell change the way we live?

VIII. Conclusion:

Hell is a frightening place which rightfully disturbs many people. The violent description of the abode of the damned has lasting implications on how we minister, view the Lord, and appreciate Christ's work on the cross. The doctrine of everlasting punishment should give us an urgency and zeal in our appeal to the unrepentant. The fires of Hell ought to generate a profound fear of the Lord and disdain for sin, as the ferocity of His wrath reveals the intensity of His hatred for sin. Finally, we should bow in humble adoration at the work of Christ. 2,000 years ago He underwent the ferociousness of God's wrath, the same wrath which will be poured out in Hell, on our behalf. Truly God has been gracious in rescuing us from what we rightfully deserve. May this study cause us to tremble at the Word of the Lord and zealously proclaim the hope of salvation to the lost.