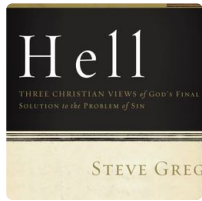


# OpenTheo

## Three Views of Hell (Part 2)



### Three Views of Hell - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg delves into the biblical references to fire that is not quenched and worms that do not die in relation to the idea of hell. He notes that the apocalyptic language used in the book of Revelation and Mark 9 should not be taken literally, as there will no longer be night and day when Jesus returns. Instead, he suggests that the reference to Hinnom Valley could be a real possibility, as the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the Romans resembled each other closely.

### Transcript

Alright, we'll return to our subject of the Three Views of Hell. I spent the first session, at least the last part of the first session, talking about biblical data related to the subject of hell and the main arguments in favor of the traditional view. The traditional view being that hell is a place of eternal torment for those who are lost after the Day of Judgment.

The alternative views, as I mentioned, are more than one. One view is that hell is temporary, followed by annihilation. The other view is that hell is temporary, followed by reconciliation to God, so that ultimately all people will be brought to repentance and reconciled to God.

Now, you may have been acquainted somewhat with these two alternative views and associated them in your own mind with cults or with at least liberalism in the church rather than conservatism or fundamentalism or evangelicalism. I have no respect for cults nor for liberalism, frankly, in the church, but I do have respect for some of the people who presented what I think are respectable evangelical biblical exegesis in support of some alternate viewpoints. But before we would try to support alternate viewpoints, we'd have to find out what's wrong with the traditional view.

Why not just go with that? Is there any weakness in the biblical case for the traditional view? As I gave a summary of all the biblical evidence for the traditional view, I mentioned and pointed out that there are some verses that speak of everlasting fire, everlasting punishment, everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. There are

references to fire that is not quenched and worms that don't die. There is reference to a lake of fire where their torment is perpetual day and night forever and ever.

And one passage, the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, and they have no rest day nor night. But apart from these verses that I just alluded to, really all the other verses that have anything to do with the doctrine of hell do not mention eternal duration or even, in most cases, anything specific about what the person is experiencing. They speak of perishing, destruction, being devoured, and the idea of eternal torment is not specifically mentioned in the vast majority of the verses relevant to the case, including the verses that speak of Gehenna.

In fact, we saw all the verses that use the word Gehenna, which is the only word in the Greek language in the New Testament that can credibly be translated as hell, and none of them spoke of specifically Gehenna being a place of eternal torment. They simply spoke of Gehenna as the place where the wicked would be thrown, and it's better not to go there. Better to be mutilated in this life and escape being thrown into Gehenna than to be healthy and intact in this life and have your whole body thrown into Gehenna.

One of the biggest problems with the case for the traditional view is that virtually all of the passages that speak of eternal, unquenchable fire and so forth are found in what we call apocalyptic passages. If you've been through the book of Revelation with me here or if you've studied much about the book of Revelation, you know that apocalyptic literature is a certain genre very common in Scripture. Much of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament is apocalyptic.

Certainly, Daniel and Ezekiel and Zechariah are, and much of Isaiah and Jeremiah and some of the other prophets have apocalyptic imagery. The Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 is apocalyptic. The book of Revelation is apocalyptic, and there were many other books the Jews and the Christians read that are not in our Bible that were apocalyptic in style.

It was a popular genre and a commonly used genre of expression both in the canonical books and some non-canonical books of the period. Now, what I'm saying is I'll tell you the two passages which in my mind at one time were the strongest arguments for the traditional view of eternal torment were Revelation 14:11 and Mark chapter 9. Now, Revelation 14:11 is where it says, and I've said this several times already, the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, and they have no rest day nor night who worship the beast or take the mark of the beast. Now, this is referring to the lake of fire in the context.

They'll be cast in the lake of burning with fire and brimstone, and the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever and so forth. Now, the biggest problem I have now with that passage is that some years ago I became aware that Revelation is borrowing language from the book of Isaiah, and the passage in the book of Isaiah that it's talking

about is Isaiah 34, and this is actually a passage that is talking about the judgment on the land of Edom. Now, the land of Edom doesn't exist anymore.

Edom was once located southeast of Israel and was the land of Esau's descendants. The Edomites have been extinct for 2,000 years. The last known Edomite in history was Herod the Great, and he died when Jesus was a baby.

No more Edomites after that. There will be no future judgment on Edom because there is no Edom. There aren't even any descendants of Edom.

The Edomites are extinct. There's no land of Edom. There's no people of Edom.

So, a passage that talks about the judgment on Edom presumably is something that has been fulfilled in the past, back when Edom existed to be judged, and in fact, Edom did come under judgment. They were wiped out by the Nabateans, and this was in the centuries just before Jesus came. Now, in a prophecy about the judgment upon Edom, in Isaiah 34, it says this in verse 8 and following, For it is the day of the Lord's vengeance, the year of recompense for the cause of Zion.

Its streams shall be turned into pitch, its dust into brimstone. So, we've got fire and brimstone here. Its land shall become burning pitch.

It shall not be quenched night or day. Its smoke shall ascend forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste.

No one shall pass through it forever and ever. Now, here we have a land that's burning with fire and brimstone, and its smoke is ascending forever and ever. The language of Revelation 14, 11 is, The lake burns with fire and brimstone, and the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever.

The same language as Isaiah uses to speak of the judgment of Edom, which must have taken place sometime before the birth of Christ. Since Edom's been gone since before then. In other words, Isaiah is using apocalyptic language, as is commonly done to the prophets, to speak about some temporal thing that happened historically.

The language, if we didn't know that this was something that happened historically, might be, if we took it literally, might sound like some eternal judgment, but in fact, it does not appear to be. When Edom was destroyed, its smoke has gone up forever. You can go over to where Edom was, and there's not smoke ascending forever.

It's not literal. Now, in Revelation 14, 11, it says of those who were cast into the lake of fire, the smoke of their torment ascends forever. It doesn't say that their torment is forever and ever, but the smoke of their torment.

Smoke is what's left after something's been burned up, and its ashes are smoldering.

The smoke that was associated with their torment continues to rise forever. But are they still suffering forever? The wording does not necessarily say that, but the next phrase is, they have no rest day nor night.

Now, that certainly sounds like they're consciously tormented. But wait a minute. It says day or night.

Is there day and night in the new creation after Jesus comes back? There's no night there. There's no sun. There's no moon.

There's no stars. How does one measure day and night? In fact, the same thing is said in all the passages about the lake of fire. They're tormented day and night, forever and ever.

But there's no night and day anymore after Jesus comes back, according to Scripture. When Jesus comes back, it's the last day. There's no more days and nights after that.

And therefore, the language seems to be perhaps non-literal. Not surprising. It's in the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation has probably more non-literal language than any other book in the whole Bible does. But what does it mean, they have no rest day nor night? That, in Revelation 14, is contrasted with those who are saved who enter into rest. And that rest, of course, that they enter into is in the presence of God.

Those who are excluded don't ever experience that rest. Verse 13, Then I heard a voice from heaven saying, Right, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord for now, and yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them. That is, after Christians die, they enter into a rest.

They rest in the presence of God. They rest in a place of blessing. Those who are cast into the lake of fire, they don't have that rest.

They don't enter into that rest. Whether it means that they are conscious in a state of unrest forever and ever, or whether it simply means that they are deprived of that rest that the saved enjoy forever and ever, perhaps by being annihilated or something else, is perhaps not as clear as we might wish it to be. Maybe to you it is.

All I can say is the more I look at it, the less I'm sure that that is saying that. I'll tell you, the more I read the Bible, the more I become aware of things I didn't know when I was growing up, like the nature of apocalyptic imagery in the Bible and how it is used, and in the book of Revelation. I don't expect anyone to agree with me just because I say something.

I only put out the information. It may convince me more than you in some area or

another. The other passage you mentioned, in Mark 9, it says, The fire is not quenched, and the worm doesn't die.

That also, as it turns out, comes from the book of Isaiah. It comes from the very last line or the last verse in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 66, it talks about, well, what is it talking about? Different people have different opinions.

And therefore, depending on your opinion of what Isaiah 66 is talking about, you may reach one conclusion or another about the last verse of the chapter. My opinion is that Isaiah 60-66 is a prophecy about the introduction of the new covenant and the destruction of the trappings of the old covenant. Obviously, a transition that took place in the middle part of the first century.

In connection with that, the language is very symbolic, very apocalyptic, but it says in verse 24 about the redeemed, the last verse of Isaiah says, They shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

This speaks of a time where the godly will go out and observe the corpses of those of whom it is said their worm doesn't die and their fire is not quenched. Well, that's the language Jesus used. You don't want to be thrown into Gehenna where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

Apparently, he was saying these people in Isaiah are in Gehenna. But what is Gehenna? Well, whatever it is, their corpses are there. Now, I'd always pictured places of eternal torment, you know, not dead corpses, but people who are kind of alive and experiencing sensations of pain and agony.

This is talking about going out and looking at the corpses, dead bodies of people whose worm does not die. Now, at one time it was suggested to me that the worm is a symbol for their spirit or their soul that never dies. I consider this to be extreme forcing, seeking proof of a doctrine that cannot be found anywhere else and really can't be found there either.

The idea that the human soul is the worm that doesn't die is very unlikely, since in Scripture the worm refers to decay and rot. Worms eat corpses. When you die, you become food for the worms, is what the Bible teaches.

And their worm not dying means that the worm is continually decaying these corpses and the fire is never going out. Now, this is apocalyptic imagery. I mean, if we're going to say this literally, we have to believe there's not only human souls that are immortal, but there's worms whose souls are immortal.

Immortal worms as well as immortal people, which kind of raises questions. Were these worms made in the image of God too, and that's why they're immortal? Is immortality

really part of the image of God at all? It raises questions about some of the arguments that we've rested in before. All I can say is that in Isaiah 66, which provides the imagery for Jesus' statements about Gehenna in Mark 9, it does not appear to me that it's talking about what we call hell.

It's talking about a place where there are corpses and where the righteous walk among them and view them. I don't plan to go for strolls in hell after I've gone to heaven, do you? If I did, I wouldn't expect to see corpses or immortal worms, dead people but living worms. This is imagery that I think is a mistake to press it, a literal interpretation of it.

Now, what it means is another story. If it is indeed talking about the Valley of Hinnom, there is a very real possibility that when Jesus used the term Valley of Hinnom, he meant the Valley of Hinnom. He never said otherwise.

In his generation, one of the key things he taught about, and so did John the Baptist, was that his generation was facing an imminent crisis. That God was, through Christ and through John the Baptist, calling the believing remnant of Israel to come into the kingdom of God, and those that would not respond were going to face a fiery holocaust, which did occur. Now, Josephus tells us that when that holocaust occurred, the bodies in Jerusalem lying around the streets were rotting and foul, and bodily juices were running down the streets, the place was foul.

They started throwing bodies over the walls until they filled up the Valley of Kidron outside the wall of Jerusalem. Other Jews escaped to the Romans, and the Romans killed them. Or they escaped to the Arabs, and the Arabs killed them.

I don't know whether Josephus says anything about the Valley of Hinnom or not, but the Valley of Hinnom might very well have become a place where many corpses of those who died in that holocaust were disposed, in the fires, like criminals' bodies were thrown there. It's very possible. But one thing that's very important is to note that the Valley of Hinnom was a term that was used by Jeremiah in passages that Jesus and his audience certainly were familiar with.

And I'd like you to look at them, because the Valley of Hinnom was also called Tophet. Tophet was the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom. And in Jeremiah chapter 7, verses 31 and 32, it says, They have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, that's the Valley of Hinnom, Gehinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters, this is when they were burning them to moloch, in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come to my heart.

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says Yahweh, when it will no more be called Tophet, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury in Tophet until there is no room. Now what this is talking about is the Babylonians are going to come to Jerusalem as the agents of God's judgment on the apostate Jews who

were burning their children to moloch in the Valley of Hinnom. And through the Babylonian invasion and slaughter, the Valley of Hinnom will be filled with dead bodies.

This was in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Jeremiah mentions it again in chapter 19, verses 6-9. Jeremiah 19, verses 6-9 says, Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says Yahweh, that this place shall no more be called Tophet, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. And I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place, and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of those who seek their lives, their corpses, I will give as meat to the birds of heaven and for the beasts of the earth, perhaps to the worms as well.

I will make this city, that means Jerusalem, a desolate and a hissing, everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its plagues. And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters. This did happen in the siege when they were starving.

And everyone shall eat the flesh of his friend in the siege and be in desperation with which their enemies and those who seek their lives shall drive them to despair. Then over in verses 11 and 12, And say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Even so I will break this people and this city, Jerusalem, as one breaks a potter's vessel which cannot be made whole again. They shall bury them in Tophet, till there is no place to bury.

Thus I will do to this place, says the Lord, and to its inhabitants, and make this city like Tophet. Jerusalem would become like Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom. When? When the Babylonians came in 586 B.C. and wiped them out.

Is it conceivable that Jesus might have used the same imagery in speaking of the Romans coming and doing the same thing in Jerusalem? The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans were the two times Jerusalem was destroyed by enemies under the judgment of God. And the events were so similar that it's often difficult, if not impossible, to decide in Old Testament passages that predict it. Is this talking about 586 B.C.? Or is this talking about A.D. 70? Because they were almost identical occurrences.

If Jeremiah referred to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. as a time when dead bodies would be thrown into Tophet, into the Valley of Hinnom, and Jesus came saying, Hey, there's another judgment of the same kind imminent, and those of you who do not accept my kingdom are going to go to this Valley of Hinnom, Tophet, as it were, Gehenna, it's entirely possible, it seems to me, that he might be talking about the Valley of Hinnom. Now, we still have the problem in saying him who can destroy the body and the soul in Gehenna. But in my opinion, this could mean only that their bodies are thrown into Gehenna and God is not done with them after that point.

Their soul now has to be reckoned with and destroyed also. Their entry into the realm of

judgment under God is when they die, and their bodies are thrown into Gehenna. Their soul also experiences destruction at the hands of God in sort of a separate judgment or at the same time.

The point I'm making is it's not as clear as I once thought that Jesus is using Gehenna as an image for something other than Gehenna. I always thought Gehenna was an image for hell, but maybe it isn't. He never said it was.

He said Gehenna. And the Jews of his time would have understood that to mean what Gehenna means, the Valley of Hinnom. And that has a background in Jeremiah, which resembles... Jeremiah's time was very much like the time Jesus was in.

It was the generation that was about to see the destruction of Jerusalem and the wiping out of those who rejected God's words. In the case of Jesus, the Messiah. Another problem with the traditional view is that the word eternal, which is applied to fire and punishment in some passages, is the word eonious in the Greek from the word eon.

Eon means age. Eonious means something like unto the age. Some people translate it age, abiding.

It's not clear exactly what the English word should be, but it has to do with an age. It's related to an age or ages. And it doesn't always mean endless.

Sometimes it does. According to Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, a very conservative, acceptable, evangelical source, Vine says that eonious means, quote, duration, either undefined but not endless, or undefined because endless. That is, eonious can refer to an undefined period of duration, undefined because it's ageless, or undefined but not necessarily ageless, just an undefined period of time, which means that the term everlasting or eternal is not the most perfect translation for the word in certain contexts, which context is kind of up for grabs depending on one's assumption.

But I would point out that in Jude, verse 7, it tells us that the people of Sodom, or that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, have currently, Jude speaks as if this was true in his time, he says, they suffer, present tense, the vengeance of eternal fire, eonious fire. Now, did Sodom and Gomorrah experience eternal fire? If you went to the Dead Sea region now and went to where Sodom and Gomorrah were, would you see fire still burning there now? One suggestion that has been made is that when the Bible speaks of eternal fire, eternal punishment, or indeed eternal life, what may be implied, and I'm not saying this is true, but it's something to consider, is that these things are called eternal only because they emanate from the eternal God. They come from an eternal source.

They're not temporal fire. They're not temporal punishment. They're not temporal life.

They're the life of God, the judgment of God, the fire of God, who is Himself eternal. That fire which consumes Sodom and Gomorrah was eternal fire because it was the fire of



God Himself. It's not still burning there right now, but our God is a consuming fire, the Bible says, and God is eternal.

And it is that eternal fire from which Sodom and Gomorrah were incinerated. The eternal punishment can be punishment that comes from that eternal God, that eternal source, and indeed our eternal life is the life of God given to us through the Holy Spirit, through regeneration. In which case, the statement about eternal fire or eternal punishment or even eternal life would not in itself be talking about the duration of the punishment or the fire or the life as much as the source and the origins of it.

It's possible. I don't say it's so. All I'm saying is, it's more up for grabs than I once thought in terms of what these verses are necessarily teaching.

Here's an important point. The Bible nowhere says that unbelievers live forever. This seems to support the conditional immortality view in some measure.

In that, the doctrine that man is by nature immortal is found in Greek philosophy, but it's not found in any statement of Scripture. The only Scriptures that speak of immortal people are the Scriptures that speak of believers whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but will have eternal life, will be immortal. In fact, in 1 Timothy 6.16, Paul speaks of God who alone possesses immortality.

That's an important statement perhaps. Paul in 1 Timothy 6.16 says God alone possesses immortality. That alone seems to be there for a reason.

It's emphasizing something. Only God is immortal and only those that He shares His immortality with. God is immortal, but when we are found in Him, we receive in Him eternal life.

But what about those that are not in Him? Well, the verse sounds like it's saying they're not immortal. Well, where did the idea that man is innately immortal come from? The philosophers of the Greeks taught it, and we don't know what degree it entered Christian theology through that source. We do know that not all early Christians believed in the immortality of the soul.

Some did and some did not, and there's not a very clear statement about it in Scripture. Now, there is a statement in Scripture. One passage I know of in Scripture that would indicate that people do live on after they die even if they're not saved.

And that is the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16, beginning with verse 19. There we find a beggar who apparently is saved, and after death he's in Abram's bosom. There's a rich man who obviously does not appear to be saved, and he finds himself in hell, in fire, in torment, wishing he could warn his brothers about this place.

This story seems to confirm the idea that even an unbeliever lives on after death and

therefore might seem to confirm the doctrine of the immortality of human nature. Though, we'd have to admit, even that story doesn't say that the rich man was immortal. He might live on after death until some certain point, but it does not say that he would live on forever and ever and ever and ever.

The fact that he lived on does not mean he was immortal necessarily. He might be, but that's what we're trying to figure out. It doesn't say so.

What's more, the story of Lazarus and the rich man has got to be looked at a little differently than many didactic passages of Scripture because according to many authorities that story did not originate with Jesus. He didn't make it up. It's not like one of his parables that he came up with.

The story of Lazarus and the rich man apparently had its origins in rabbinic literature. I have to confess I have not located it in rabbinic literature, but there are many people who have written articles. One was Joseph Thayer who wrote an article saying that he found the exact same story in a particular rabbinic writing and he gave the name of it.

I have not been able to get my hands on that writing, so I can't confirm it, but it would appear at least possible that when Jesus told the story of Lazarus and the rich man, he wasn't necessarily telling a true story or even a parable, but he was taking a known story told by the rabbis which may or may not have reflected reality and Jesus was using it as an illustration where the rich man represented the Jews and the beggar represented the Gentiles who didn't have the benefits the Jews had and the Jews' callousness toward the Gentiles is seen as displeasing to God represented by this man in the flames. I honestly don't know what to do with that story anymore. I used to just always take it as a literal story, but when I found out that there's a very strong possibility that Jesus was borrowing a story from the rabbinic literature, a well-known story at the time, to make sort of a proverbial point from it, that raises questions as to whether Jesus is really affirming that the story is true or is even really true to life.

I don't know. All I can say is that the evidence for the immortality of the human soul is not strong in Scripture. And it may be non-existent in Scripture, especially Paul saying that God alone possesses immortality seems significant.

When God warned Adam and Eve of the dangers of eating of the wrong tree, He said, in the day you eat of it, you will surely die. In Ezekiel it says in chapter 18, the soul that sins, it shall die. Even in the New Testament, Paul says the wages of sin is death.

Well, Adam and Eve did die. People do die because of sin. But I always taught that this death is eternal torment, eternal separation from God.

Well, maybe it is. But if it is, God certainly didn't make that clear. It seems rather strange if I told my kid, now don't disobey me, because if you disobey me, you're going to die.

And they disobey me and they die. And then they meet me on the other side. And I say, now, in addition to dying, you're going to be tortured forever and ever and ever.

I just didn't mention that to you before. That was my little secret. It seems to me that if people are told, you sin, you die, but really you don't really ever get to die.

You get sort of a lease on life forever where you never really get to die. You just get to suffer and suffer and suffer and suffer and never ever really die at all. You see, the Bible, if it teaches anything about the faith of the sinner, is that he dies.

That's kind of the opposite of the doctrine of immortality. Immortality means you don't die. There's no place that says that the sinner doesn't die, but there's many places that the sinner does die or perish or is devoured or is consumed.

These are the words that are used in Scripture and even if we were to say, well, the fire is literally eternal. Well, there may be a place of eternal fire that people are thrown into, but what if they aren't eternal? The fires burn on long after they're dead and their smoke ascends forever and ever. I'm saying that the deductions and the assumptions I made from the Scriptures that we're talking about here at one time, to my mind now, don't seem to be as justified as I once thought.

Here's another concern. I've already addressed this somewhat in our first lecture. Eternal punishment for temporal crimes seems unjust, even by God's stated standards of justice.

God's stated standard of justice in law is an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth, stripe for stripe, burn for burn, life for life. You kill someone, you die. You knock someone's eye out, you get your eye knocked out.

That's justice. That's what God called justice. Now to say, however, when God meets that justice, He goes by an entirely different standard.

You sin for 80 years, you suffer for billions and billions and billions of years, and then you've just started suffering because you've got billions and billions beyond that and it never ever ends. Honestly, it's very difficult to see how this squares with God's own teachings on the subject of judgment and justice. I'm not saying that God would not be justified if He saw this as justice to do it.

I'm not God's judge. He's mine. I'm not saying what God can or cannot do or what He is or is not justified to do.

I'm simply saying that if He does that, it doesn't seem to agree with what He teaches about justice. And we would have to assume, therefore, that His terms of justice that He reserves for His own disposition of judgment are different than those that He teaches us. Or so it would appear.

Now here's another thing. And many haven't thought of this. There are places where the Bible speaks of degrees of judgment to the lost.

It shall be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom than for Capernaum. It will be more tolerable in the day of judgment for the Queen of Sheba than it will be for the people of Capernaum. Well, how can the day of judgment be more tolerable for one lost person than for another lost person? Unless there are degrees of judgment that some are more tolerable than others.

Or how about that statement Jesus made in Luke 12, verses 47 and 48, that that servant who knew his master's will and did not prepare himself and did things worthy of stripes will be beaten with many stripes, but that servant who did not know his master's will and did things worthy of stripes will be beaten with few stripes. Sounds again like God meets out proportionate judgment proportionate to the level of guilt. And we shouldn't be surprised.

That's what the law of Moses suggests. There's degrees of punishment for degrees of crimes. And it sounds like ultimately even the day of judgment is that way.

Some have more tolerable judgment than others. Now, here's the problem. If the judgment is eternal or everlasting and endless, then how can it be proportionate? Everyone receives exactly the same.

Now, there's a time when I would have said, ah, they all suffer forever, but not the same intensity. Some people are going to have hotter fire than others to endure forever and ever. But I've rethought that recently just to see, does that make sense to me? Suppose we said there's grades of judgment in hell.

Let's say the heat level is different. Let's say there's five different grades just for the sake of discussion. There's grade one, two, three, four, five.

Now, what is one times infinity? Is it any different than five times infinity? Anything multiplied by infinity is infinity. A person who experiences grade one punishment for infinity and a person who experiences grade five level of judgment for infinity, both of them are receiving infinite judgment. None is receiving better or worse than the other.

It's the same. Infinity is infinity no matter what you multiply it by. Eventually, it all is the same.

And therefore, it seems to rule out proportionate judgment, which the Bible seems to teach in some places. Now, here's another thing. If men are not immortal by nature, now, we haven't decided that they are not, but I've suggested that the doctrine that they are is certainly open to question.

If men are not by nature immortal, then for God to torture or torment people forever

means that He has to give them immortality so that they can suffer forever because otherwise they don't possess it. He has to deliberately, supernaturally by an act of His will, extend their existence forever and ever and ever and ever so that they can suffer forever and ever and ever. Now, what would His purpose be for that? What could it be other than vindictiveness? I mean, it's one thing to say, I spank my children because I hope to bring correction to them.

And God disciplines people because He hopes to bring correction to them. In fact, He even punishes the wicked hoping to bring them to repentance. But if there's no hope of repentance, there's just the hope of perpetual suffering and no change forever and ever.

Nothing can improve. Then what can God's motive be for this? Except just to make sure they get theirs. I don't know.

Maybe God does that. I'm not sure that the Bible portrays God that way as one who just takes delight in vindictiveness toward those who deserve to have his vindictiveness measured out. And here's another thing too.

If God does judge and torment eternally, then it must be because that's what they deserve. Because God will never give worse than what they deserve, right? God is just. So whatever God gives the sinner is what is just and what they deserve.

But if we say the sins that a man commits in his lifetime are worthy of and deserve eternal judgment, that means they can never really be paid off. There can never ever be a time when the judgment is completed. There will never be a time when it's settled.

There will never be a time when God has dealt with sin and it's gone from the universe. The correct measurement has been meted out and now he's done with that. Now he can get on with the business of his kingdom alone and not have to worry about punishing sinners anymore.

If it's forever and ever and ever, if it deserves forever and ever, then there never is a time when people really get what they deserve. Because if you go out a million or a billion years into their judgment, they still haven't gotten all they deserve. They deserve a lot more than that forever and ever.

So people will never get what they deserve because you never reach the end of what they deserve. Therefore, any time short of that, they haven't yet gotten what they deserve. They're still getting it and getting it and getting it.

And therefore, there's never a time when justice prevails. There's never a time when people have gotten what they deserve because forever and ever and ever, they still don't have all that they deserve. Therefore, sin is never really dealt with finally.

There's always more punishment deserved than has been meted out. That is a hard

concept for me, frankly. Another one, and all of you have thought of this at one time or another, is if indeed all non-Christians are going to burn forever and ever and ever and ever and ever, how can God or we, who love some of those people, I mean God loves them all and we love the ones we've known, how can we be enjoying heaven very much, knowing that maybe my grandfather, my ex-wife, maybe some of my children, they're in torment.

I'm over here enjoying God, but over here just on the other side of the universe, I know that my son or my daughter or my grandfather or my grandmother, they're in absolute agony, which is never ever ever going to end. I don't know, I mean God may have a way of settling that matter, but I just don't see how God could ever be happy with that arrangement. And if it wouldn't make him happy, why would he set it up? Now I can see why God might set up a world in which temporarily things go the way he doesn't want them to go, because he's testing man, it's a time of probation.

Eventually he's going to settle it though, and when he's done, he's going to have the universe exactly the way he wants it, hopefully. If God never gets things the way he wants them, then he's the cosmic loser for all eternity. We have to assume that once God has dealt with sin, the universe will be exactly the way God delights in it being.

But if God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and he's not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, how can God ever be delighted knowing that perhaps the majority of the people he created and loved are not only lost, but they're suffering forever and ever and ever because they're lost. Especially when we wonder, well couldn't God forgive them if they would repent at that point? He could have forgiven them at any time during their lifetime. What is it about the fact that they're now dead that makes it impossible? I say, I'm sorry, I'd love to forgive you, but I can't do it.

What? Who's putting the chains on God that he can't forgive who he wants to forgive? What is it about people who've died, lost, that puts them beyond God's mercy? I don't know of anything in the Bible that says that people can get beyond the point where God would want to forgive them. All of our assumptions to the contrary are based on the assumption that the Bible teaches eternal torment as the fate of the lost. And I guess the question is, does it clearly teach that? I don't see that it clearly teaches that.

Now let me give you quickly the alternative views and the reasons people hold to them. I can't look up all the scriptures with you, but I'll give you scripture references for each of the points. Let's talk about the arguments for universal reconciliation, the evangelical doctrine of universalism, as opposed to the liberal or Unitarian doctrine of universalism, which are New Age and heretical.

And this may be heretical, too, but it's at least held by evangelicals and it may not be heretical. They at least feel they have a scriptural case. First of all, Calvinists would be the ones who object most to universalism.

If you're a Calvinist, you're not going to sympathize with anything in this argument, because this argument starts with the assumption that God wants everyone to be saved. Calvinists don't believe that God wants everyone to be saved. They believe that God from eternity wanted some people to go to hell and some people to be saved.

That's Calvinism. But Arminians, like me and like the historic church before Augustine, taught that God really did want everyone to be saved. God isn't happy about anyone being lost.

Therefore, God, who is the sovereign of the universe, wants nothing so much as for everyone ultimately to be reconciled with him. The Bible, I think, teaches this in a number of places. If you want a few scriptures, of course, there's 1 Timothy 2.4. It says that God wants all men to be saved.

There's many scriptures like that. John 3.16, whosoever believes in him shall not perish. God loved the world, so he gave his only son.

Ezekiel 18, I mentioned God says a number of times, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that they turn from their ways and live. God wants everyone to be saved. Many, many, many places in scripture affirm this.

Then we also have this, and this again is not what Calvinists would affirm, but most Christians who are not Calvinists would. Jesus died to redeem all people. Jesus' death was adequate to save everybody.

Now granted, the fact that Jesus died to save everyone doesn't help anyone until they repent. But presumably, if anyone would repent, the death of Jesus has already covered their sin. They're simply accepting, they're simply cashing in on what God has already purchased on their behalf when they repent and receive forgiveness of sins.

If Christ died for all people, then that means Christ paid a price adequate to save the whole human race. If the whole human race is not ultimately saved, then Jesus paid too much, and Jesus got ripped off. This is what universal reconciliation people say.

Furthermore, the Bible sometimes speaks of universal salvation and restoration. There are places that speak of, that sounds like it. In 1 Timothy 4.10, it says that Jesus is the Savior of all men, especially those who believe.

In Romans 5, verses 18-19, it says that as through one man, Adam, condemnation came on all men, so through one man, Christ, justification came on all men. That's Romans 5.18-19. In Colossians 1.19-20, and also Ephesians 1.9-10, both places say that in the fullness of time, God will bring all things together, whether in heaven or on earth, into Christ. That's His ultimate and eternal purpose, is to bring all things into one in Christ.

Now, all might not be, might be a hyperbole, but the way it's worded, if it's not a

hyperbole, it sounds like universal reconciliation. In John 12.32, Jesus said, If I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto me. Universalists of this sort say, the Bible sometimes hints that all men ultimately will be drawn to Christ.

Now, none of these people are saying that people are saved through other religions, or that anyone will be saved without Christ. What they're saying is that those who don't know Christ in this life, if they turn to Christ after this life, they'll be accepted then, just as if they had done so in this life. They may have to suffer.

They may have to go to a hell of torment for a while to bring them around to repentance, but they will all eventually come around. Now, here's what is perhaps the clincher argument for this particular view, and that is this. If Christ desires that all will be saved, and He paid the price for the redemption of all men, but because of the devil's interference, the majority of men never are saved, and Jesus is ripped off of what He paid for, then who in all eternity is the winner and who is the loser? The devil, even if he's tormented in the lake of fire, can rejoice that he thwarted God's plan, and took most of the souls that God wanted to save with Him.

And God, who wanted everyone saved and paid for their salvation, ends up ripped off of the majority of those He paid for forever. And yet, everything in Scripture suggests that Christ is the cosmic victor over the devil. He came to destroy the works of the devil.

Greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world. He destroyed him that had the power of death, that is the devil. Many things in Scripture indicate that Christ is the victor over Satan.

But if Satan, in fact, ends up with most of the souls damned, in whatever form damnation may take, whether it's annihilation or eternal torment or whatever, and God simply doesn't get what He wanted, ever, then God's the loser, the devil's the winner. And that doesn't sound like what the Bible teaches about God and the devil. Sounds like God beat the devil at his own game and redeemed all of humanity.

Not all of humanity apparently gets saved in this life, obviously, but the universal reconciliation people say, in the next life, God has not cut off their opportunities. Now, by the way, I mentioned that many in the early church believed this doctrine. Origen believed it, though Origen is sometimes discounted because he held a number of views that people consider to be heretical, yet he was a leading Christian theologian in Alexandria in his day, and Philip Chaff, a major Christian historian of modern times, believed that at one time most of the church held to Origen's form of universalism.

And I mentioned of the six leading schools in the first four centuries, four of them were universalists. One, the one in Rome, was eternal torment, and the one in Ephesus held to the view of annihilation or conditional immortality. The other four believed in Christian universalism.



In other words, if we had lived back then, Christian universalism might have seemed like the orthodoxy as much as eternal torment seems like orthodoxy from our vantage point at this time in history. That doesn't make it right or wrong, but it certainly changes the perspective of things. One thing we can say for sure, if universalism were true, it would be the one view that would make God the happiest because all who have rejoices want to sin and repent.

And although the Bible doesn't say so plainly, it certainly does not deny that God would rejoice if a sinner repented even after death. If God wanted him saved during his life, why would God stop wanting him saved after his lifetime? I would say heaven would be a much happier heaven if everyone eventually is brought to repentance and brought there. Now, it may sound like I believe this view.

I'm only emphasizing it in a positive way because it's up against our default position and it has to be presented that way. I'm not a universalist myself, and it's not even the view I'm most lean toward. But it is a view that has some cogent arguments of a biblical sort on its side, it seems to me.

The other view, of course, is conditional immortality. This view has the following arguments. As I mentioned, 1 Timothy 6.16 says that God alone possesses immortality.

Seems to deny the traditional view that man innately possesses immortality. In fact, it was Satan who said, you shall not surely die if you eat that fruit. God said you will.

Satan said you won't. It seems like the doctrine of human immortality was the devil's own promise in contradicting what God said. We pointed out that Jesus said that God is able to destroy the body and the soul in Gehenna.

This is in Matthew 10.28. I can understand the destruction of the body. What is the destruction of the soul? Now, the destruction doesn't necessarily mean annihilation. It could mean just ruin.

It could mean just spoiling. At the same time, it could mean annihilation. He seems to indicate the body and the soul alike can be destroyed by God.

That could sound like it's talking about annihilation. Might not be. But one thing is interesting too about human immortality.

Look at Romans 2, if you would. In verse 6 and 7, Paul says that God at the coming of Jesus Christ, at the revelation of the righteous judgment of God, He will render to each one according to his deeds. Verse 7, eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for honor and glory and immortality.

Men have to seek for immortality. They don't possess it innately. God will give eternal life to those who seek for immortality in this life.

Sounds like it's not a given that all people have it by default. Immortality is a gift from God to the saved ones in Christ. Christ is immortal because He is God and God is immortal.

And when we are in Christ, we are like branches attached to a vine. The life that is in the vine is in the branches. To be in Christ is to have eternal life in Him.

That's what it says in 1 John 5. This is the message that God has given to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He that has the Son has life. He that has not the Son of God has not life.

The life is in His Son. What is that life? It's eternal life is in His Son. If you are in His Son, you have eternal life.

If you are not in His Son, you don't have eternal life. Now, I realize from all my earlier youth, I would have said, well, not having eternal life. Eternal doesn't just mean duration, it means quality.

Well, maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. I don't know. All I can say is there is no promise anywhere in Scripture that a person who is not in Christ will be immortal.

There are many things that say that a person who is not in Christ will die, will perish, will be devoured, will be consumed. These are the words of many of the passages we already looked at. Eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord is mentioned.

And therefore, there is certainly a possibility that only the righteous have immortality. In fact, there is a verse in Revelation that suddenly makes sense to me when I think of it this way, that I couldn't make sense of before. And it has to do with my amillennialism, but it's in Revelation 20.

If you are not an amillennialist, this argument won't count for anything with you. But if you are, you may have noticed that John says he saw, I believe in heaven, the throne set and those who were beheaded. It says the souls of those who had been beheaded for Christ were enthroned in heaven.

It says they lived on and they reigned with Christ during the so-called thousand years. But it says the rest of the dead did not live again until the end. That is, until the resurrection.

That is to say, John saw people who had died for their faith, Christians, and they were still living on. They were enthroned with Christ in heaven during the age of the church, as I understand this passage. But those who were not Christians who died didn't live on and didn't live again until the end of that period when they were raised from the dead for the judgment, suggesting that they really didn't.

I mean, there's a difference between the believer and the unbeliever after they die. The believer lives on. The unbeliever doesn't live on until the resurrection.

The Bible says that men must seek immortality and they find it as a gift from God when they put their faith in Jesus Christ. The verses that speak of God giving eternal life to those who believe in Jesus and those who reject him shall not see life, and verses of that sort are so numerous. I'm sure you're familiar with many of them.

They would include John 3.16, John 10.28, Romans 6.23, the wages of sin is death, that the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So some have eternal life, others have death. John 5.11 and 12, which I just quoted, this life is in his Son.

He that has the Son has life. He that has not the Son of God has not life. The language, as I said, of judgment in many of the passages, the key passages about what happens to the lost are terms such as death, destruction, consumed, and perish.

These are the most common words used of what will happen to sinners. And if indeed, in addition to being consumed and devoured and dying, then in addition to that they are kept supernaturally alive forever and ever and ever to be tormented forever and ever, this is not really mentioned clearly anywhere, and it seems like God should have warned about that. Not that he's obligated to, but especially since God wants to induce all men to repent, it seems like if eternal torment is what they get, if they don't, he should have mentioned that fairly clear because that would have produced tremendous inducement.

If people think all I've got to suffer is death because that's all God mentioned, I sin, I die, well, I'll take my chances. But if they were told, if you sin, you'll be tormented forever and ever and ever and ever. I mentioned a guy emailed me today and said, what do I tell an unbeliever if he says, well, if I reject Christ, am I going to burn forever? What would I tell him? I'd say, I'll tell you what, Jesus said that if you don't enter into life because you kept an eye or a hand or a foot that was leading you into sin, that you will regret that decision, that what you will experience at the hands of God will be so horrendous that you will wish you had plucked out your eye or cut off your hand or that you had a millstone put around your neck and been cast into the depths of the sea.

Jesus said, it's better to have a millstone put around your neck and be thrown into the depths of the sea than to have what you're going to have. Now, I don't know if it's eternal torment or not, but frankly, having a millstone on my neck and be thrown into the depths of the sea would be bad enough if it was just that. But Jesus said, no, you'd rather have that.

You'd rather have your eyes gouged out. It sounds to me like whatever it is that the lost are going to experience, they're going to have real strong reasons to regret it. God doesn't have to tell us exactly what it is.

Maybe it is eternal torment. Maybe it's temporary torment followed by, you know, annihilation. Maybe it's temporary torment and eventually everyone repents.

But the point is, whatever it is, the torment part is the part that's not worth dying without Christ for. The fact is, no one at the end is going to reject Christ and come out saying, boy, that was a smart decision. I'm glad I did that.

Anyone who dies without Christ is going to have anguish, misery, gnashing of teeth, darkness, torment, maybe forever. But even if it's not forever, how long would you like to endure torment for? How long would you like to endure anguish for? No one is going to get away with anything, with God. And I find it interesting that the apostles themselves, when they preached, did not ever bring up the subject of hell in their preaching.

They didn't say, repent or you will go to hell. Now, Jesus said at one point in Luke 13, if you don't repent, you will perish. We use the word perish and all these things to apply to our preconceived ideas of whatever hell is.

I have to say, I don't have any longer a preconceived idea of what hell is. I don't know if it's literal fire or figurative fire. I don't know if it's eternal fire or fire for a while.

And if it's fire for a while, I don't know if it results in reconciliation of everyone or annihilation of everyone. In other words, I just don't know. Because to my mind, there is sufficient reason to question whether the verses that traditionally have been used to teach there's an eternal hell of fire, whether they really ever taught that or were intended to teach that.

Or whether that's a doctrine that the Roman Catholic Church used to keep people in line for a thousand years. And which just has continued with us because it got a lot of momentum over a thousand years of promotion. Or whether there's something more cheerful in the end.

Even if the ultimate end is more cheerful than eternal torment, the interim between judgment day and whatever that cheerful thing is, is horrendous. And when people say, I'd rather be in hell with my friends. All my friends are going to be there.

How would they like to be for 15 minutes in a burning house with their friends? Or I wonder how the Jews felt in the ovens in Auschwitz with all their friends. That probably only lasted a few minutes. But it was terrifying.

What if it was more than a few minutes? What if it was more than a few hours? What if it was more than a few days? What if it was longer than a life prison term? But it was anguish and torment. I don't think anyone is wise to take their chances with God. Even if I cannot affirm with certainty that people will be tormented forever and ever, that doesn't mean there's not a terrifying prospect for those who go into eternity without God.

All I can say is the biblical data is less clear than I once thought. And I have been aware in a growing degree for the past 15 years that it's not as clear as I once thought. The more I read, the more I study the Bible, the more I read the opinions of certain Christians about what the Bible says, the more unsure I've become.

But you know what? Apparently, it's not absolutely essential for me to know. I don't know if God really is interested in getting people saved by holding hell over their heads. You know, the famous sermon by Jonathan Edwards, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, it's all about, you know, you're a wretch like a spider hung over a flame.

God's delighting in your torment and so forth. The first person to actually teach that God and Christians would take delight in seeing people tormented forever was Tertullian. The earlier Christian fathers saw it as rather disgusting but necessary.

But there actually are people who think that God takes great delight in seeing sinners tormented. There's not one line of Scripture that would suggest such a thing. Everything I read in the Scripture is if people are tortured forever and ever, God's not happy about it.

And what I can't figure out is why would God set up a system that forever and ever he's going to be unhappy about? When does he get to win? When does God get to be the victor and say all things now are as I would have them? I don't know. But the doctrine of eternal torment seems to say there will never be such a time for God. And the rest of Scripture strikes me as saying someday God will have settled this matter of sin in his universe one way or another.

He's going to have it settled in a way that is acceptable to him. And I don't have to know how that is any more than I have to understand the Trinity perfectly or have to understand predestination. There's all kinds of mystery things I don't need to know.

I'm only curious about them but I don't have to know. I don't intend to share that faith. I am prepared for any of the scenarios to prove true.

Since I don't know which of these passages are symbolic, which are literal. And it seems to me as one who actually studies the Scripture probably more than the average person, for me after 15 years of this to be less sure than before convinces me that the Bible must be deliberately vague on this. The sinner doesn't deserve a full disclosure from God as to what all he can expect if he rejects God.

All he needs to know is that he owes it to God to repent. And if he doesn't, there will be consequences that he'll regret. That's all that God's required to tell us.

And it seems to me that God has deliberately not spoken with a single voice on all of this. Not that he contradicts himself anywhere, but there are just hints here and there and so forth. And I don't believe the Bible is very clear on it.

So now you know something about what the three views are. And you know something about why they are held by different people, what the arguments are. It's now for you to chew on for the next 15 years or more.

Maybe it won't take you as long. You might be smarter than me. Like I said, I'm a slow learner.

But these are the things that I'm chewing on. And now you have the unsettled state of mind that I have. You can thank me for that.

And we'll close with that.