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Final State of Unbelievers



Beyond End Times - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the concept of the final state of unbelievers, which refers to what happens to non-believers after they die. He explores the idea of annihilationism and its association with certain religious groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists. While annihilationism was often considered a heretical belief for evangelicals, Gregg has spent the past 15 years researching and considering it as he re-examines the traditional view. He delves into the different scriptural arguments both for and against the idea of the final state of unbelievers.

Transcript

Tonight we're going to talk about the final state of unbelievers. And here I'm going to do, I'm going to take somewhat a different approach than I took with the previous lectures because frankly this is an area where there are different views and I'm not, I'm not sure I'm settled on which one I believe, which is the case with a number of issues. A lot of things I've taught in the previous lectures represent changes in my earlier positions.

I held one thing when I was younger and then gradually changed my views to the views I now hold on them. And my life has always been one of transition. At least I want it to be until I, till I know everything.

I want to be able to keep being corrected and keep being, you know, increasing in what I know. Some years ago when I began to see that the things I felt God was showing me in the scriptures were very different from the popular views. And in many cases, the popular views were the only ones I'd ever heard.

And I, you know, I was uncomfortable with what I was seeing in the scripture, but I couldn't deny it because I didn't know anyone else who taught it. I remember telling God, you know, I'm not sure I really want you to show me anything more because, you know, it looked like it's a slippery slope to any kind of weird heresy down the line. Once you dislodge from the popular, you know, mainstream evangelical viewpoint, you never know where you'll stop.

And I, I guess I haven't stopped yet. And I'm getting more and more heretical as I get

older. But at the same time, I don't think I'm being heretical.

And fortunately, everything that I'm considering first, first, I'm a slow learner. I am a very slow learner. It takes me a long time.

I'm essentially very conservative and resistant to change. But at the same time, I don't want to be unteachable and I don't want to be incapable of change when change is appropriate. So that's why my change from being dispensational to all millennial took me eight years because I just I was seen a little bit, seen a little bit and resisting a little bit, couldn't resist because it was there and finally just gave into it for several years, almost my whole life.

I have taught the traditional view of hell, which is the view of eternal torment, that those who are not saved will burn forever consciously in hell. Now, several years ago, probably maybe as many as 10 years ago, I think it probably was about 10 years ago, I first became aware or not. I think it's maybe 15 years ago.

It's been some time now. I first became aware of some other views other than that traditional view, which were held by evangelicals. And those views were annihilationism and universalism.

Now, I have to say I had always associated annihilationism in my mind with Seventh-day Adventists and with Jehovah's Witnesses, both of which are groups I have strong differences theologically with. And I and there was sort of a guilt by association there. I didn't want to consider it.

I mean, to me, annihilationism was just another heresy of the Jehovah's Witnesses, nothing to be considered by evangelicals. And likewise, universalism, which if you don't know what it is, you'll know soon. The only form of universalism I'd ever heard of was New Agey, Unitarianism kind of stuff.

And I never felt that Christians who believe the Bible would ever hold any form of universalism. But I was naive. I began to be aware that not only are there universalists and annihilationists who are not cultists or liberals, some of them prove to be people I respected in church history or even scholars, evangelical scholars I respect now who are alive today.

And I am for several years now, when people would ask me about hell, I would simply tell them I know of three possible views and I'd survey the pros and cons of each view. That's kind of what I'm going to do now. But I always held to the eternal torment view as a default, because, as I said, I'm conservative.

I don't mind changing, but it takes me a long time to change. So even though I was aware there were good arguments for other views than the traditional view, I thought until I'm absolutely dislodged by compelling biblical evidence from the traditional view,

I'll just stay where I've always been, you know, and I'll be open-minded about the others. I feel that I am moving from the traditional view of my own self now, and I'm still not sure where I'll land.

Frankly, I'm very attracted to the universalist view, and there's some scriptures in its favor, but I don't think there's as many scriptures in its favor as there are of the annihilationist or the conditional immortality view. As far as the traditional view, I might as well tell you, I don't think there's very much scripture in its favor at all. The more I study the scriptures and understand the scriptures, the less I see why anyone ever taught it.

And those who teach these alternate views often say that the idea of eternal torment was basically a Roman Catholic idea, which the Roman Catholic Church used to keep people in line with these threats of eternal fires, but it really isn't taught in scripture and wasn't always taught in the church. Now, it's really hard to nail down what was taught on this subject in the earliest years of the church, and different church fathers seem to have different ideas. I've read from a number of sources, but I don't know if they really are independent sources.

They might get it from each other. I don't know. But I've read from a number of sources that in the first four centuries of the church, there were essentially three main Christian schools in the Mediterranean world.

There was one in Antioch, one in Alexandria, one in Edessa, one in Ephesus, one in Rome, and I forget what I left out, but there were six main schools where Christianity taught their converts and raised up ministers. And it is said that four of those six schools taught Christian universalism. One of them taught annihilationism, that was Ephesus, and one, Rome, taught eternal torment, which begins to look suspicious because Rome is where the Roman Catholic Church arose, and that was the only one of the six schools that taught eternal torment.

And I was raised believing eternal torment, and I know the scripture. I defended it. I've taught a series on foundations for many years, which included a lecture on eternal judgment, where I would mention all three views, but I would still pretty much defend the eternal torment view because there were scriptures I thought taught it.

But the more I've come to understand the scriptures and look at them in context, the more I've doubted that the traditional view is correct. Now, I actually don't care which view a person holds, and apparently God doesn't either, or else he'd make it clearer. If it was truly a clear thing in the scriptures, then evangelicals who use the Bible alone for their views wouldn't have such divergent opinions about it.

It's clear that the fate of the lost is always represented as very much to be avoided and very grievous in scripture, but as far as the specific state of the lost and their eternal

condition, it's not as clear as one would get the impression if they'd only heard the traditional view all their life. But when you begin to hear the scriptures for other views, you begin to say, hmm, maybe, who knows? Now, I'm not going to try to convince you of one view or another. I'm thinking I may eventually move.

I've known of these views for 15 years now. I've been in the ministry for 35, so the first 20 years I didn't even know. I didn't teach or know about anything other than the traditional view.

But the last 15 years, I've been aware of them. I've been looking at them. I've been turning over my mind as I read my Bible.

I've been keeping them in mind to see whether I get the feeling that it's teaching one or the other. And only now do I feel like I'd come out and say I'm having serious doubts about the traditional view. And I think that either of the other two has more scripture in its favor.

And possibly the conditional immortality view has the most scripture in its favor. Now, we'll talk about all these. But as you can see, if you have the notes, there's not many Bible references in your notes, because I put these particular notes together without my Bible in hand.

I actually was, I forget where I was, in a restaurant or something with my computer. I typed in all these notes. I intended to put the scripture references in later when I had my Bible with me.

And I did on my notes. I wrote them in pencil, but they're not on yours. But I'll give you some scriptures for each one.

First of all, a lot of the validity of the traditional view of hell, the idea of eternal torment, that is, people will be tormented forever and ever in hell, comes from the idea that human beings by nature are immortal, that they have eternal souls, that when the body dies, the soul lives on necessarily. Because it's usually they'd say it's because we're made in the image of God. God is an eternal being and a spiritual being.

We are essentially spiritual beings with an eternal spiritual side. And we happen to live in a body for a while. But once the body dies, we aren't in our body anymore.

Now, from things I said in the earlier lectures, you know that I still believe this is true of Christians. But it's hard to find anything in the Bible to say that mankind in unbelief has immortality. And we're going to look at the scriptures on that a bit tonight.

But it is the assumption that all people, including unbelievers, have eternal life of a sort and live forever and must necessarily live forever somewhere. That has given the basic foundation to the idea that they must be consciously tormented forever and ever,

because they can't go to heaven if they don't know God. They have to be somewhere else away from God.

And away from God is bad. And you do read about fires that are not quenched and worms that don't die. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever.

And they have no rest day nor night. I mean, this is the language of the eternal torment view. And so, because of the default assumption that people are immortal by nature, it follows that if you don't end up with God forever, you must end up somewhere else forever.

But you're as alive if you're not with God as if you are with him. You're just in a conscious state of torment. And, of course, typically, traditionally, it's been the idea that there's literal fire licking at you all through eternity.

And you're actually in a state of burning and fire. There are many Christians who hold a slightly modified version of the traditional view. They still believe in eternal torment, but they say the fire is probably metaphorical, that it's not literal fire, but it's something else tormenting that's, you know, in different views exist of that.

But both of those views, whether it's literal fire tormenting or some other thing that fire is a metaphor for, they agree that the unbeliever lives forever in a tormented state. And that's the traditional view. Traditional, at least as of we know, at least as of Augustine.

And Augustine was not the first to teach it. As I said, in the first four centuries, at least the school in Rome, the Christian school in Rome, taught eternal torment. But it seems like four of the schools taught universalism, of whom Origen in Alexandria was one of the main advocates.

And the school in Ephesus taught annihilationism or conditional immortality. Now, of course, we obviously can't make a decision, therefore, on the basis of which view is most ancient, because all three of the views are very ancient. It's just that the Roman Catholic Church became the predominant church in the world for a thousand years, and the Protestant Church branched off of it and retained much of the Catholic theology by default.

And so Catholics and Protestants have always taught the view that was taught at Rome. Now, it may be true. That's what we need to examine.

Is it the view that scripture teaches or does the scripture lead in another direction? Once I've told you all the evidence, I'm going to just leave it with you. That's what's different than the other lecture. I was able to tell you what I believe the Bible teaches and why.

And it's better than all the other views. So what? But here, the truth is I don't care as much as some people do as to which view is correct. I would have been very alarmed 20

years ago to meet someone who said they were an evangelical Christian and believed in either universalism or annihilationism, simply because I thought it was heterodox.

It was heretical. I now realize that evangelical Christians have belonged to all three camps and none of them can truly be called heretical. They are just different from each other.

Two of them clearly are wrong and one is right. But which is right and which are wrong? I'll have to leave to you decide. Here's the basic.

Well, let's talk about the word hell, first of all, because we you know, the traditional idea is when people die, they go to hell. And hell, in the popular understanding of Christians, is a place of eternal fires and torment. Now, hell is a very unfortunate word to have come into the English Bible when when the Greek and Hebrew texts were translated to English.

I'm not sure when the word hell first was introduced. It certainly was in the King James and the King James influenced all other English translations a great deal. And most of our English translations do contain the word hell.

The question is whether that whether they should or not, there are in the old testament, there's one Hebrew word that is always translated. Well, it's not always, but the word hell in the Old Testament is always one word in the Hebrew, and that's the word shale. But that word in the Hebrew text is used almost equal number of times to translate hell or the grave.

Shale, I think, is translated 32 times in the King James Version as hell, and I think 29 times translated as the grave. And scholars today, regardless of their leanings about the view of the traditional view of eternal, eternal torment, agree that shale, though it was translated hell many times in the King James Version, has nothing to do with the concept of eternal fires, because shale in the Old Testament is where good people and bad people alike went. It was simply the undifferentiated place of the dead.

That's why it could be called the grave. Sometimes it meant nothing more than the grave. Sometimes it meant just not even the physical grave, but just the state of being dead.

To be in shale was just to be dead. But shale, no, there's no Hebrew scholar alive today, as far as I know, who believes that shale should be translated hell, as that word is popularly conceived by Christians. And yet shale is the only Hebrew word in the Old Testament that ever was translated hell.

So if shale isn't translated hell, you don't even have the word hell in the Old Testament. And it's obvious that shale, there's a strong case can be made that shale doesn't mean anything like what we normally speak of as hell. It speaks of the state of being dead.

And at least half the time, it means just the grave itself. Now in the New Testament, the case is somewhat different. There are three different words that are translated traditionally as hell.

One of them is the Greek equivalent of Sheol. And we know that because when the New Testament writers quoted Old Testament verses that use the word Sheol, they use the word Hades instead of Sheol. Hades is the Greek equivalent of Sheol.

So Sheol in the Hebrew and Hades in the Greek are essentially the equivalent words in two different languages. And Hades therefore also means the place of the dead and or the grave. Hades is translated the grave only once in the New Testament.

But there are other places where it might reasonably be translated the grave, but it's not important whether it's translated the grave or not. The important thing is that Hades just means the place of the dead. It doesn't specifically mean what most of us think of as hell, because most of us think of hell because of our condition as a place of eternal torment.

And it is not. Hades can't be the place of eternal torment because in Revelation chapter 20, around verse 14, I think it is, it says death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. Now the lake of fire in Revelation is much closer to the concept of hell and that we think of as the ultimate place people go after the judgment.

But Hades itself is cast into the lake of fire and therefore cannot be equated with the lake of fire. Hades is not something eternal. It is burned up itself in the very end.

Death and Hades cease to exist or they are thrown into the lake of fire. So the translation of Hades as hell is very inappropriate. If by hell we think of that English word being a place of eternal torment for people after the judgment.

Now for that reason, many new translations of the Bible have wisely left the word Sheol in the Old Testament and the word Hades in the New Testament untranslated. That is, instead of assigning the word grave or hell or whatever to it, they realize that neither word is really a perfect translation and they just leave it as Hades. You'll find many English translations that just leave the word Hades as Hades instead of giving it an English translation and Sheol as Sheol.

I think, I'm not sure, but I think the New American Standard is one that does that. Maybe even the NIV, I'm not sure. But it's a common trend in modern translations because that reflects the fact that neither Sheol nor Hades really are talking about what traditionally has been called hell.

It's a mistake of the King James Version to have used the word hell for it and it led to a lot of confusion. Now there's two other Greek words that are translated as hell in the New Testament. One of them is used only once.

It's the word Tartarus. T-A-R-T-A-R-U-S. Tartarus.

Like what gets on your teeth? Tartar, us. Now Tartarus is mentioned only one time in the New Testament. It's in 2 Peter 2, I think it's verse 4, where it talks about the angels that sinned.

He is cast down to hell, it says in the King James Version. In the New Testament, both the words Hades and Tartarus are common in pagan Greek literature as well. But that doesn't mean it was wrong for the New Testament writers to use them.

I mean, the Greeks had a bunch of mythology about Hades and what happens to people when they die and so forth that the New Testament writers don't mean to affirm when they use the word Hades. But Hades and Tartarus come from other Greek literature before the New Testament was written that both speak of the condition of persons after death. But Tartarus, if we're to develop some theology about what Tartarus is, it would have to be more like Hades than like what we usually think of as hell because it says the angels who sinned, he cast down to hell awaiting the judgment of the great day.

So they're only in Tartarus until the judgment, not afterwards. I guess if they go anywhere, if they're condemned after judgment, they must go to the Lake of Fire, which is not Tartarus or Hades. Now, the Lake of Fire in the New Testament, of course, is only mentioned in the Book of Revelation a couple of times, or more than a couple, maybe three or four.

And its imagery is certainly the closest thing we have to the traditional idea of hell because the Lake of Fire is where lost people are thrown after the judgment, whereas Tartarus and Hades are where they are before the judgment and are not eternal conditions or eternal places. Now, there's one other Greek word that is used, translated hell traditionally, and most modern translations even still translate it hell because they feel like this word really is talking about hell. This is really talking about the Lake of Fire.

And that is the word Gehenna, G-E-H-E-N-N-A, Gehenna. This word is only used by Jesus and one time by James, who quotes Jesus a great deal in his epistle. The word is not found in Paul's writings or John's or Peter's.

Only Jesus used the term and James following Jesus' example used it one time. In the Gospels, the word Gehenna appears about 13 times, but a lot of these are in parallel accounts in Mark and Luke. So, as far as we know, Jesus only used the word maybe four or five times in his teaching.

But, of the three words that are traditionally translated hell, Hades, Tartarus, and Gehenna, only Gehenna could conceivably apply to what is traditionally called hell. So, if there is an appropriate word to translate as hell, it's Gehenna. But, there is some question even about the propriety of using hell as an English translation for that.

Because all people who study the languages know Gehenna is a Grecianized form of the Hebrew words Gi-Hinnom, which means the Valley of Hinnom. Now, the Valley of Hinnom was an actual place on earth. When Jesus said it's better to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand than to keep them and cast into Gehenna, that word simply would mean better to lose your eye or hand than be thrown into the Valley of Hinnom.

Because that was an actual place and Gehenna means Valley of Hinnom. It was outside Jerusalem. In the days of Christ, it was a garbage dump.

The fires were kept burning perpetually there. It was disinfected with sulfur, which is what brimstone means. Brimstone is sulfur.

So, it smelled like sulfur around there. Garbage was burned there and even the bodies of criminals were burned there. But, it was a loathsome place.

And, the reason it was loathsome is because at an earlier time in Jewish history, the evil kings of Judah had set up an image of Moloch in the Valley of Hinnom. The valley was also called Tophet, T-O-P-H-E-T. And, sometimes there's an H at the end of that word, Tophet.

But, the word Tophet or Gehenna or Valley of Hinnom was a location where in the days, for example, of Manasseh, the king of Jerusalem, of Judah, they burned infants to the idol of Moloch. Moloch had the head of a goat and the body of a man, a big, hollow, brass idol with its arms extended at the elbows with the palms up. They'd stoke fires inside of this bronze idol until it burned red hot.

Then, they'd put live babies in the hands so that they wouldn't have to be too disturbed by the baby's screams. They'd have trumpets play and bands play loud and they don't have a big orgy in front of the idol while the baby burned. Unpleasant, obviously.

How God tolerated this is hard to imagine. How Israel tolerated it is hard to imagine. But, they did.

And, they even practiced it. It was a Canaanite religious practice. And, many times, the Jews in their history borrowed the Canaanite practices and did horrible things.

Well, in the reforms of Josiah, Josiah defiled that valley and made it into a garbage dump so that no one would ever offer to Moloch there again. If you look over at 2 Kings, chapter 23, let's see here. 2 Kings, chapter 23, Josiah, this is about what Josiah did when he was making his reforms in Israel.

It says, And he defiled Topheth, which is the valley of the sons of Hinnom, the valley of burning their children in Moloch and passing through the fire. So, Josiah defiled Topheth, the valley of Hinnom, so that people wouldn't use it anymore for that purpose. And, it wasn't used for that purpose anymore by the Jews.

And, hundreds of years later, in the days of Jesus, it remained a garbage dump. And, everyone knew about the valley of Hinnom. It stunk.

It was a place where the refuse of the city was burned to keep it from infecting and smelling up everything. They'd keep the fires burning continually. There were unquenchable fires there.

Not supernatural fires. They just kept them going. They never put them out.

And so, I've known this since I was young. I knew that Gehenna meant that. But, my understanding was that Jesus used the valley of Hinnom as sort of a type or an image to call to mind what hell would be like.

And, I always approved of Gehenna being equated with the lake of fire or what we call hell. And, I just felt like, well, since Gehenna means the valley of Hinnom, apparently hell, the closest thing on earth that we can imagine it being like would be like the valley of Hinnom with those constantly burning fires and so forth. The more I've looked at it and thought about it, the more I've come around to thinking, Jesus gave no reason to believe that when he used the word Gehenna, he was thinking of anything other than Gehenna.

Anything other than the valley of Hinnom. He might have, but he gives no clue that he did. He simply used it as a place where you'd be thrown if you didn't become a Christian.

Now, remember who he was talking to? He was talking to the Jews who were facing a holocaust. They didn't know they were facing a holocaust, but he knew it. There was going to be this war.

There was going to be this destruction of Jerusalem. There's going to be this slaughter where the dead bodies were so numerous, they'd pile up in the streets and they'd throw them over the walls into the valley of Kidron. And, according to Josephus, the bodies of the dead would be rotting, putrefying in stacks in the valley of Kidron.

We don't read anywhere where these bodies eventually ended up. Maybe they just lie right there. Maybe they eventually, after the war, cleaned it out and threw them in the valley of Hinnom, for all I know.

But, whether they did or not is not the most important thing to know. But, to recognize that in the Old Testament, the valley of Hinnom is likened to Jerusalem under judgment. In Jeremiah, chapter 19, it's very interesting, I think.

Jeremiah 19, God told the prophet to go to the valley of Tophet, to the valley of Hinnom, and to prophesy there. And, among the things he said were, verse 6, Jeremiah 19, 6, 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. So, what he's saying is, there's going to be slaughter associated with this place, not garbage

being dumped, and certainly not Moloch worship.

But, rather, the valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna, is going to be associated with slaughter. It's just going to be called the valley of slaughter. Now, if you look further down in the same chapter, verses 11-13, it says, And say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, even I will break this people and this city, meaning Jerusalem, as one breaks a potter's vessel which cannot be made whole again.

Suggesting Jerusalem's restoration would be somewhat impossible. And they shall bury them in Tophet until 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 will be like Tophet. And the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah shall be defiled like the place of Tophet. Because of all the houses on whose roofs they have burned incense to all the hosts of heaven and poured out drink offerings to other gods.

Now, Jeremiah said, you know how Tophet is a place of defilement? A place of burning? Jerusalem's going to be like that. Now, he was probably talking about what the Babylonians were going to do, since that was what was impending when Jeremiah wrote. But, there's certainly no, it takes no stretch of imagination to recognize that what happened by the Babylonians in Jerusalem was identical to what happened by the Romans.

And for Jeremiah to say Jerusalem is going to be overrun and it's going to be like you're in the Valley of Hinnom. And then it happened. And then generations later, Jesus comes along and says, if you guys don't repent, you're going to be in the Valley of Hinnom.

Who? Jerusalem. If Jesus is using the term as Jeremiah did, which is possible, then he's only using Gehenna, or Valley of Hinnom, as an image like Jeremiah did of slaughter and of Jerusalem being wiped out. Now, it's kind of interesting, I've just come to realize this recently, but some time ago I began to wonder if this was the case.

Because I looked at all the cases where Jesus used the word Gehenna, and it crossed my mind just from the context of each one that he could be saying to his contemporaries that if they reject what he's saying, they will be facing this fiery ordeal in 70 AD. And I wondered, I wonder if Gehenna could be a reference to that. And then when I discovered this passage in Jeremiah, it kind of felt, whoa, that's pretty close.

Pretty close. The Holocaust of 586 BC, the Holocaust of 70 AD. The first one was called Jerusalem becoming like Gehenna.

Why couldn't the second one be? Especially since there is now precedent for that in the Jewish prophetic language. Now, I won't say this is so for sure, because everything Jesus said about Gehenna could also apply to the Lake of Fire. I still believe it's hard to avoid

the idea that there is a Lake of Fire after the Day of Judgment, because it says so.

In Revelation 20, people were judged by the things written in the books, and those whose names were not found written in the Book of Life were cast in the Lake of Fire. So there is a Lake of Fire into which the lost will be consigned after the Judgment, that is, after the Second Coming of Christ. The question I have now is, is that what Gehenna is? Or is Gehenna, those references Jesus made, simply a reference to, using the term just the way Jeremiah did, a reference to Jerusalem being overthrown? Which is, of course, what Jesus talked a great deal about.

Now, consider the ramifications of this. The only words in the Bible that have ever been translated Hell in the English Bible are Sheol, Hades, Tartarus, and Gehenna. It is beyond question inappropriate to use the word Hell to speak of Sheol, Hades, or Tartarus.

There is still a possibility Gehenna might apply to what we usually think of as the Lake of Fire and what we think of as Hell. But that is not even certain. And I tell you the truth, the more I think about it, the more I study it, the more I think, probably not.

Probably even Gehenna isn't talking about Hell. And once that step has been taken, there is no word in the Greek or Hebrew that can rightly be called Hell. The word Hell isn't even in the Christian vocabulary, which is bizarre.

Lake of Fire, that's there. But the Lake of Fire is not called Hell, but that's okay, we can use the word Hell to refer to the Lake of Fire. But the interesting thing is, once you look at the words that have always been translated Hell and think of what they say in context, what they mean and what they don't mean, there really is not a single Greek word or Hebrew word in the Bible that indisputably is properly translated as Hell.

The word Hell may not be a biblical term at all. Isn't that a strange thing to consider? I mean, that just blows my mind when I think about that. Because belief in Hell as a place of eternal torment has, in my mind, all my life, I've considered that to be one of the, well, certainly one of the things that divides between evangelicals and liberals.

I mean, you've got to believe in the, to be an evangelical, you've got to believe in the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the trinity, justification by faith, the second coming of Christ, Hell of torment. Those were on the short list of things you had to qualify to be an evangelical. And now I wonder, you know, at least that last one, I'm not sure if that's really a doctrine that, it certainly is not taught clearly.

If there's any place that teaches clearly that there's a place of eternal torment, it's the lake of fire in Revelation 14 and Revelation 20. But as we shall see when we look at those passages, it's not entirely clear that that's an eternal torment kind of a description either. But it is certainly a reference to where the lost go after the judgment.

So I'm not going to be deprived of that. There's there is a reference to where the lost go.

Those whose names are not found written in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire.

The question is, what happens then? What's in the lake of fire? How long are they there? What what's their experience of that? That's where the differences of opinion come. OK, now the traditional view, I've got it in four points here on your notes. This is the basic mentality that that informs the traditional view being made in the image of God.

All humans are innately immortal and must consciously spend eternity in one state or another. That is what I've always believed. That's what I thought the Bible taught.

Interestingly, there's many people now, scholars have said you can't find that teaching in the Bible, but you can find it in Greek philosophy. And it is a Greek notion came from Plato that humans are naturally immortal, but that the Hebrews never made any hint of it in the Old Testament. They didn't even know about a life after the grave in most cases, though they had a concept of a resurrection.

They didn't know of any continuing awareness of anything after the grave. David said, you know, you know, can those in Sheol praise you? Is there any remembrance of you in Sheol? Meaning when people die, do they even remember God? Do they praise him? And the rhetorical question seems to me, no, they don't. And of course, Solomon said in Ecclesiastes, the dead know nothing at all.

But his statements in Ecclesiastes can't all be taken at face value because he's not always right. But we'll worry about Ecclesiastes another time. But the point is that the concept of being conscious beyond the grave is not revealed in the Old Testament.

And if it is revealed anywhere, it's revealed in the New. But it's not entirely clear that it's revealed there either, except with respect to Christians. It is clear that there is a teaching in the New Testament that Christians live on after death.

But does that reasonably extrapolate to all human beings are naturally immortal and therefore non-Christians must live on after death too. And I'm thinking there's not an awful lot there to support that. But we'll see.

That's the first assumption of the traditional view. Second is only those who believe in Christ will have access to God's presence for all eternity. All others, though equally conscious, must remain forever absent from God, apart from all light, joy, fulfillment, consolation and blessing.

Number three, the language of unquenchable fire, which we'll see in a moment, suggests either literal flames or if metaphorical, some equally tormenting condition of soul that never ends. And fourthly, that this torment never ends for the lost in hell is suggested by passages like 2 Thessalonians 1.9 and Revelation 14.11. Now, let's look at some of the verses that seem to favor this eternal torment view. There's not as many as you would think.

I used to think it was like this common teaching of Scripture until I actually went looking for the verses. Sort of like when you go looking for those verses, say the devil's a fallen angel, you know, everyone knows it's in there. But when you actually look for the verses, you can't find them.

You know, you can find a few that are usually used. But sometimes in context, it doesn't look like they're being used correctly to make that doctrine. That's how it ends up being with this eternal torment doctrine.

Let me show you some classic scriptures that would there's about four passages primarily in Mark chapter nine. And you'll find this also in parallels in Matthew. And I'm not sure maybe Luke two, but but in Mark chapter nine, I'm going to give you the verses I used for years to prove eternal torment as a biblical doctrine.

Beginning at verse 39, Jesus said, do not forbid him for no, no, no, no. Start verse 42. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

Now, whatever the judgment of sinners is, it's not desirable. It'd be better to be thrown in the sea with a millstone on your neck. And I don't think that sounds very fun.

And so whatever the sinner receives, it's definitely worth avoiding. And Jesus made that clear enough. But he said, but whosoever verse 43, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

It is better for you to enter into life maimed. He didn't say into heaven. He said into life.

There's a possibility he meant being born again. It's better to come to Christ, having sacrificed something of your comforts in life than to not come to Christ and end up in Gehenna. He says better to enter into life maimed rather than having two hands to go to Gehenna into the fire that shall not be quenched.

Well, the fires of the Valley of Hinnom were never quenched, where it says their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It's better for you to enter lame rather than having two feet to be cast into Gehenna into the fire that shall never be quenched, where their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched.

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It's better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye rather than having two eyes to be cast into hellfire, where their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched. Now, three times here, he refers to Gehenna as the place where the worm does not die and their fire is not quenched.

Now, since I've always considered this to be a description of eternal torment, one of the things so is the fire is not quenched. That means it's eternal fire. The fire is going to burn

forever and ever.

I kind of got disabused of this idea by reading the prophets. Prophets like Isaiah and especially Jeremiah, where Jeremiah, you don't have to read very far into his book to find many times where he talks about the fire that no man shall quench. But it's always a reference to the Babylonians coming destroying Jerusalem.

The fire that no man can quench is God's anger toward Jerusalem. He says, my wrath shall burn as a fire that no one can quench. But in the context, he's threatening to send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem.

And that's the fire that no one can quench, God's wrath. Now, that no man can quench doesn't mean it's still burning forever and ever and ever, because Jerusalem isn't still burning. So it must have burned out.

But no man can quench it. I think the idea is that this is God's wrath. No one can stop his wrath.

When he sends his wrath, you can't quell his wrath by any human force. God is irresistible in his judgments, and he'll send fire. But no one can quench that fire doesn't mean it'll never go out.

But in Isaiah, the actual words that Jesus uses three times here are found in the last verse of the book of Isaiah. And Isaiah is, of course, a very familiar book to the Jews and to the Christians of the first century. And the last verse would particularly stick in your in your mind.

I mean, if you read that book, the way it ends, especially with this imagery, would be very familiar to Jesus here, as I would think. In Isaiah 66, verse 23 and 24. Now, I am convinced that chapters 60 through 66 of Isaiah are talking about the destruction of the old order of the law and the introduction of the new order of the new covenant.

So the destruction of the old order of the law, of course, involves the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. And I think that that is mentioned a number of times in chapters 60 through 66 of Isaiah. But right now, I just want you to see the last two verses.

It shall come to pass that from one new moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord. And 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.

And they shall be in abhorrence to all flesh. Now, Jesus quoted this line, their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched, three times when he talked about Gehenna. Well, Isaiah, I am convinced, not all would agree with me, of course, but I'm convinced Isaiah is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD here.

And this is used that way. Now, he certainly isn't talking about hell. He's talking about corpses.

Corpses are dead bodies. These are not living souls tormented in eternal fires. These are corpses that are burning and being eaten by worms.

Worms that don't die. Now, maybe the individual worms die, but there's always a new batch of them. There's always an undying worm population that is eating these corpses.

Now, there is apocalyptic imagery here, of course. I mean, no one is really eaten perpetually by worms and corpse. But this can't be held because the righteous go out and view this.

The righteous go out among them and look at the corpses, it says. And this is not an eternity. This is where there's new moons and Sabbaths.

This is during, you know, after the judgment, there's no sun, moon or stars. There's no more days. It's the last day.

There's not going to be new moons or Sabbaths after Jesus comes back. This is not talking about the eternal state of the damned. And in my opinion, which I won't attempt to defend at length here, because I'll soon run out of time.

This is talking about the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. That's been my conviction for a very long time about this passage. And Jesus uses that language of Gehenna, which may also mean that he's talking about A.D. 70 instead of about some eternal hell.

Another passage that would be important to look at is in Matthew, chapter 25, in the story of the sheep and the goats. It's where the goats go that's interesting here. Now, I don't think this is about 70 A.D. Take note.

You don't hear me say that very often. I believe this is the end of the world and the judgment. This is the sheep and the goats judgment.

Jesus comes back in verse 31. He calls all the nations. He separates them.

He consigns them to their eternal destinies. And it says this in verse 46, the last verse, Matthew 25, 46. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment.

But the righteous into eternal life. Now, that seems like it's like after the judgment, we go into eternal life or eternal punishment. But that expression eternal punishment.

Often is I always thought that this proves that they are punished for eternal, for eternity, they never get stopped punished. They must be conscious to be punished. I mean, you don't sit around flogging a dead person, say, I'm going to keep punishing you.

You can't feel it that they're punished. Eternally seemed to me to confirm the idea that they were punished consciously forever. However, many scholars who don't hold the traditional view and are of one or the other views say it's not the punishing that's eternal.

It's the punishment that's eternal. That is to say, it doesn't say they are being punished. And the act of punishing goes on eternally.

The punishment is eternal in that it's irrevocable. Once there, if one would believe here about annihilation, let's say they're annihilated. That's their punishment.

And it's eternal. They're never going to be re raised from the dead. They're never going to come back.

They're gone forever. And because that punishment has eternal duration. It is, you know, it's an eternal punishment.

It's a punishment that lasts forever. But it doesn't say that they have eternal punishing. Now, the universalists would say about this, that the word eternal, we have to be careful about the word eternal, because to us, the word eternal means endless.

But the Greek word that's translated eternal in the Bible, in the New Testament is aeoneus, which has it as its root, the Greek word aeon or age. Aeoneus means age enduring or age abiding, or it literally means unto the ages. And so even if it is talking about something that lasts long times through the ages, it doesn't necessarily convey the idea of endless.

The word aeoneus doesn't necessarily have to have that meaning, they would say. And those who believe in universalism would say the wicked do get punished. They don't get annihilated.

They get punished for a long time. But after that, they come to repentance or they're purged by their punishment. And then they get to be restored to God.

And they'll end up in heaven too. But more to say about that view at a later time. But what I'm saying is the language that sounds like eternal torment can be understood without that thesis.

Whether it should be or not is up to people to decide, you know, by looking at it and weighing the evidence. There's also 2 Thessalonians 1.9. 2 Thessalonians 1.9 kind of sounds like an eternal torment verse, but also it sort of doesn't. The annihilationists use this one too to prove their point.

Talking about Jesus coming back, it says in verse 8, he'll come in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who don't know God and on those who don't obey the truth or the

gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. Now, the annihilationists say everlasting destruction doesn't sound like eternal torment.

They're destroyed and they're destroyed forever. I mean, they don't go on being destroyed forever. You can't go on being destroyed forever.

I mean, one could say a pyramid might take millions of years to be utterly destroyed by the forces of nature. But eventually, it would wear out completely. It'd be destroyed.

It wouldn't go on. It wouldn't take forever. It might take thousands and thousands, maybe millions of years, but not forever.

Nothing can take forever to be destroyed. And they say it's a destruction which lasts forever in the sense that they're destroyed, they're annihilated. And that's for good.

There's no coming back from that. That's eternal destruction. They are excluded from the presence of the Lord forever because they're destroyed rather than going to the presence of Jesus in the new earth.

And therefore, they throw in the lake of fire and they get burned up. According to the annihilationist view of this kind of a verse. Now, those who believe in eternal torment say, well, destruction doesn't have to mean annihilation.

If a truck ran into this living room right now, it would destroy the room. But it wouldn't be annihilated. There'd still be some of it here.

It'd wreck the room. But it wouldn't annihilate it. It'd just ruin it.

And so they say eternal ruin is what's really meant here, not eternal annihilation. Well, that can't be decided at this point. Both statements are capable of being true.

I mean, it could be that eternal torment could be spoken of as everlasting destruction. If by that we mean ruined, they're ruined forever. But also annihilation would work for that verse.

So that verse has a sound of eternal torment if you have that view. But it's not in itself a proof of it. Now, the strongest view for eternal torment I always felt was Revelation 14, 11.

Revelation 14, 11, and this is the last of them, kind of. There's also a similar verse about Satan being in the lake of fire and similar languages used to that here. But this is about people.

In Revelation 14, verse 11, it says, And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever. And they have no rest day nor night who worship the beast in his image and

whoever receives the mark of his name. Now, I should point out the previous verse.

Those who have received the mark of the beast, he himself shall also drink of the wrath of God. The wine of the wrath of God which is poured out full strength into the cup of his indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, etc. Now, this certainly sounds like eternal torment. The smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever.

They have no rest day nor night. This is the very best verse, I think, for deriving any kind of a doctrine of eternal torment from. But it has its problems just like Isaiah 66 does.

These people are not eternally destroyed from the presence of God. It says they're tormented in the presence of the Lamb. So, is Jesus going to be hanging out in hell forever to watch them be tormented? These are going to be tormented in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb, not separated from them.

Now, hell, by traditional thinking, is separation from God. What these people are is tormented in his presence. Furthermore, it is sometimes said, it's not their torment that lasts forever and ever.

It's the smoke of their torment. The smoke, they've been burned up. The smoldering smoke coming from their corpses ascends forever and ever.

Now, this is not literal. But it's OK if it's not literal, because that kind of speech is not literal in other places, too. Like in Luke.

I mean, not Luke, in the book of Jude, it says, when it's talking about Sodom and Gomorrah, it says of Sodom and Gomorrah in Jude, verse 7, as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them in similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire. Now, it says that Sodom and Gomorrah have been set forth as an example for all to see. Really, the word example here is a visible example for people to take warning from, because they have suffered the vengeance of eternal fire.

Well, we know that fire and brimstone destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah visibly. One might say, well, this is mentioning them being in hell. They have eternal fire in hell.

But that's not visible. That, I mean, if they are in hell, no one has ever seen that. That's not an example that anyone could observe.

But the fire from heaven that came is. And therefore, it's almost certain he's referring to the fire and brimstone that came down from heaven when he talks about the eternal fire. It's eternal because it originates from the eternal God.

His eternal wrath manifested in a moment. But, interestingly, their fire is called eternal. But it's not burning there now.

If you go over there, Brad was over there recently. He probably didn't see fires in the southern Dead Sea area where Sodom and Gomorrah used to be. So and it wasn't anyone Jude was there either.

And Jude wrote this. So it's a manner of speaking, obviously, that the wrath of God, the fire, which comes from the eternal God, is said to be imbued with the quality of eternity, but not necessarily something that itself lasts eternally. Now, these people, the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever.

One problem with making this a reference to hell is because this language, too, is taken from Isaiah. And in this case, Isaiah 34, which is a prophecy about the fall of Edom. Now, Edom fell in pre-Christian times.

Edom's been gone a very long time. And therefore, the prophecy that we'll read has got to be taken more or less in apocalyptic or figurative speech. But in Isaiah chapter 34, we know it's about Edom because he says in verse five, For my sword shall be bathed in heaven.

Indeed, it shall come down upon Edom, on the people of my curse for judgment. And then a little later here, verse eight and following, For it is the day of the Lord's vengeance, the year of recompense for the cause of Zion. Its streams, that is, Edom's streams, shall be turned into pitch.

Like instead of water, there's fire, burning pitch flowing through their streams. Figuratively, I don't think that happened literally. And it's dust into brimstone.

So you've got fire and brimstone here at the fall of Edom, which happened a couple hundred years before Christ. Its land shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day.

Its smoke shall ascend forever. So it's night or day. It's not quenched.

Its smoke shall ascend forever from generation to generation. It shall lie waste. Now, this can't be hell, of course, because there aren't any more generations after the judgment.

There aren't any more people born after that. There's no marriage in the resurrection. And so generation after generation, this is something historical.

It's day and night. So it's not after the end of the world. There's still seasons and days and nights and so forth.

Likewise, in Revelation 14, where it says they have no rest day nor night. It's taken from this passage. But again, it can't be hell.

There's no day and night in hell. That is, if we're talking about the lake of fire, if we're talking about literally. Now, this is the lake of fire.

But the difficulty arises in trying to take the description literally. Especially since the description is borrowed from a passage in Isaiah that isn't using it literally. And the question arises, if Isaiah used these very terms non-literally, must we insist that the book of Revelation, the most symbolic book in the Bible, must use them literally? Very likely a case could be made it isn't literal.

Now, having said that, we've looked at all the verses that support eternal torment. Two of them in Mark and here in Revelation are borrowed from Isaiah in passages, the very language is used that is not about hell in those passages in Isaiah. And then the eternal punishment or destruction is ambiguous.

These verses could, of course, tell us that there is eternal torment of loss, but they hardly make a strong biblical case for it since there's so many variables associated with them. And so that's what we've got in favor of the case. Now, here's some problems with the traditional view.

Let me give you some problems I've written down here. All the phraseology supporting the impression of eternal torment comes from apocalyptic Old Testament passages. We've just seen that.

Two, the Bible nowhere teaches that unsaved human beings will live forever. This view goes, as Clark Pinnock says, goes back to Plato's view that the soul is metaphysically indestructible, a view shared by Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, which is why it's so popular in Christianity. Number three, God never warned Adam and Eve or anyone else that eternal torture would be their penalty if they were to sin.

He only mentioned death, which would be an enormous understatement of the truth if the real unmentioned penalty was endless torment. Think about it. He said, in the day you eat thereof, you'll die.

I won't tell you afterwards. In fact, you won't even find out until you die, but you don't just die. You could be tortured forever and ever and ever and ever and ever.

Well, why didn't he mention that? That might have provided a little more incentive for them to be careful. I mean, there's a huge, huge, huge, huge difference, an infinite difference between a penalty that is said to be death, as we think of that term, on the one hand, or endless torture forever and ever, millions and millions of years. That's not the same thing.

Now, of course, we usually say, well, death means spiritual death. Well, maybe it does, but that's simply an expedient used by the traditional view to try to get over the fact that it says death. It doesn't say spiritual death.

And they did, of course, physically die, which is what God said. It says in Romans 6, verse 23, the wages of sin is death. It doesn't say the wages of sin is endless torment.

In fact, nowhere in Paul's writings is there any mention of endless torment, nor in Jesus, except for the, even the reference to Gehenna, don't mention endless torment. They mention being thrown into Gehenna, and the fire doesn't quench, and the worms don't die. It doesn't say you don't.

So, we really don't have, if the eternal punishment view is correct, then God kept it his little secret through the entire Old Testament, no mention of it. So, for 4,000 years, people were sinning, thinking the worst they were going to face is death. And lo and behold, God, in his cruel sense of humor says, hey, I've got a big surprise for you.

You're going to burn forever and ever and ever and ever and ever, and you're going to enjoy every minute of it. Now, you're not going to enjoy it, but you'll be aware of it. Now, that just seems strange.

If, I mean, it seems strange for God not to put all his cards on the table, especially when the cards are so different from what he actually says. Now, number four, eternal punishment for temporal crimes seems disproportionate and unjust, even by God's own stated standards, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That's his standard of justice.

What crimes could you commit in 70 years of living that would be equivalent to eternal burning and eternal torment? I mean, how could anything committed in a temporal time frame be balanced by something that's endless for infinity? An infinite punishment for a limited, even a very severe limited crime, doesn't really seem like it's in keeping with God's own stated rules for justice. Now, I used to have an answer for that when I wanted to teach eternal torment, because I thought it was true. I said, well, you know, this idea that sinning for only 70 years can't justify endless suffering, fails to remember something very important.

That is, the magnitude of a crime is not determined by how long it takes to commit it. Right? I mean, that's a good answer to this one. You can commit some of the most grievous crimes worthy of the most heinous punishments in a moment's time.

Whereas some crimes that you plan out and execute over a period of weeks are relatively smaller crimes. And, you know, I mean, you don't determine how much punishment is deserved by how much time was occupied committing the crime. It's the magnitude of the crime.

And a crime against an infinite God is of infinite magnitude. That would be what I would have said. However, I'm not sure that's a good argument.

I mean, it makes sense. But it still is hard to know that that is how God is thinking. That, you know, so this person committed crimes that in... Okay, a person commits a murder.

A justice system that God set up says, a life for a life. He committed murder, kill him. And there's no indication in the Bible that God felt that committing a murder is, you know, justifies someone being tortured forever.

I mean, think about it. Eternal torment view suggests that God is going to do to sinners something much worse than Adolf Hitler did to the Jews in his camps. They're going to be treated much worse, tormented much longer, and there's not even any relief from them in dying.

At least the Jews in the concentration camps sometimes had the relief of dying. But God's not going to give them that. He's going to just savor their torture.

Now, a lot of Christians feel like that doesn't sound very much like the kind of God that God says he is. Savoring the torture of people forever and ever. Now, I used to say, well, it's not that God likes it.

It's just that people are eternal. He can't do anything about it. You know, they got to go somewhere.

So that's where they got to go. You know, God doesn't like it, but he's got to live with it because he made people that are eternal. But my problem I have with that now is that I don't see anywhere in the Bible that says that he made humans innately eternal or immortal.

And also, God is God. If he doesn't like something, he can do what he wants. You know, if he doesn't like the idea of sinners burning forever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever, who's going to tell him he can't annihilate him? He can do what he wants to do with them.

And so it's not like God's the victim of his own creation. If he's going to burn them forever and ever and ever, it's because he wants to. Because if he didn't want to, no one can make him do it.

And so this has to be, we have to assume if the eternal torment view is correct, it's exactly the way God wanted it and likes it. That is, maybe he didn't want anyone to sin, but if they did, he wanted them to burn forever for it. That's hard.

It's hard to reconcile with, frankly, any scripture now I see, and also with the character of God that Jesus, you know, that Jesus revealed. Jesus didn't seem like the type who wanted to go burn people who were dead. He didn't seem like the type who offended him and who sinned against him.

He said, Father, forgive them. They know not what they do. Was Jesus more merciful than his father? I don't think so.

Now, another thing is the Bible speaks of degrees of punishment or proportionate penalties for sinners. Like in Luke 12, 47 and 48, it says, those who didn't know their master's will, those who did know their master's will and violated it, will be beaten with many stripes. Those who didn't know their master's will and violated it will be beaten with few stripes.

That and places like where Jesus said, it'll be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for Capernaum because Sodom and Gomorrah had less light. Well, how could it be more tolerable for one lost city than for another lost city if all are getting eternal torment? It's all about equally intolerable. In fact, I used to answer this by saying, it may be equally eternal, but the intensity might not be as great.

Some people might be in greater suffering for eternity than others are for eternity. But when you think about it, that doesn't make sense because if it's eternity, it's infinite. And infinite suffering is equal to infinite suffering.

You can say, well, they didn't have as much, but it adds up. If you're burning at 200 degrees, because you're not quite as bad as someone else, and they're burning at 300 degrees because they're worse than you. Eventually, it adds up if it's forever and ever and ever.

I mean, you never reach the end of it. But the point is, what's the difference? If you're miserable and in torment, you know, when I'm sick and feeling miserable, I sometimes chase myself for whining because I think, well, there's people being tortured right now for their faith, and I'm not being tortured. But that's not a whole lot of comfort to me because I really am miserable.

I'm not as miserable as someone else, but I'm really miserable. And if I'm going to be miserable forever, it's no comfort to me that someone else is more miserable forever than I am. I mean, if there is proportionate punishment, how can it be infinite? Because two things are equal to each other because they're infinite.

That's a problem, I think. Six, for God to supernaturally keep people alive forever, just so they can be tortured without hope of release or redemption, seems to have nothing but cruelty and vindictiveness as its motive. Such a motive does not agree with the picture of God's mercy and love for all men that the Bible, and especially Christ, reveals.

I've already made that point. The seventh point here is, how could the saints or God rejoice in eternity knowing that their loved ones are somewhere else being tortured forever? If God has no pleasure even in the death of the wicked, as he says in Ezekiel 33 and 11 and other places, how could he find any comfort in their eternal torment? I mean, anyone here who has children knows that no matter how bad your kids are, you would take no pleasure in tormenting them forever. In fact, you don't even enjoy spanking them, but you have to.

You have to punish if you're going to be a just parent. But what kind of parent would you be if you enjoyed or allowed them to be tormented forever and ever and ever and ever and ever? Could you be a happy parent? I mean, suppose you had no choice. I just got to, it's going to happen.

My kids are going to be tormented forever and ever and ever. Well, I can't stop it, but no one can make me happy. You know, no one's going to make me happy about that.

How could I be happy for eternity knowing that people I knew and loved in this world, maybe some of my kids, maybe grandkids, maybe grandparents, are forever. I mean, I'm forever enjoying Jesus, but every once in a while I remember, oh yeah, granny's over there melting still, you know, a million years later, you know. I mean, it'd be bad enough, you know, if someone goes to jail for 50 years, you think, boy, that's a long time to have to sit and rot in jail.

But granny's been melting for two million years now, and she's not any closer to being done than before. She's not even cooked yet, because this is going on forever. And this is an important thing, too, because eternal torment, if that view is true, then justice can never be done.

Because if a just penalty for a crime is to suffer forever, then justice will never be complete. Therefore, God will never have resolved the problem of evil in the world. Because there's always more punishment due that has not yet been done.

There's never a time of resolution. There's never a time where we can say justice has been done, all wickedness has been punished as it deserves, and now the universe can go on without any injustice. No, any crime that truly warrants eternal punishment will never be fully punished.

Because it takes forever to fully punish it, and forever means forever. So, I mean, this is a hard concept, even, you know, even though I've always been raised with it, and I always defended it. I never liked it much, but I felt like it's what the Bible teaches.

But now I think, I don't think, I'm not sure the Bible teaches that. Now, let me talk to you about Christian universalism. We're going over time, but this is necessary because of the nature of the material.

I know you'll bear with me. Universalism is sometimes called universal reconciliation. Now, this is not to be confused with new agey or liberal or unitarian.

Universalism, that view would hold that people go to heaven just because they're people, and it doesn't matter what religion they have, all religions save equally, and, you know, no one's really so bad as to really deserve to go to hell. So, I mean, God would never really send anyone to hell, so everyone's going to be saved, whether they're Christians or not. Christian universalism says, no, no one's going to be saved except by

being a Christian.

But they say, who says the opportunity to become a Christian ends at death? Now, this is something that is an interesting question to contemplate, because we know that God wants all people to repent, and he's grieved at any who don't. What is there about death that makes it a kind of point that God himself can't even accept repentance after that? If he wants to accept repentance, if he wants people to repent, why could he not accept repentance later? Is there some law that he's subject to? Is there some governing authority above him? That says, sorry, God, is there some reason why God loses patience at death? He's patient with sinners until the day they die. He'll even accept deathbed repentance, but a second after death, that snooze you lose, I'm not interested in forgiving, don't talk to me about your repentance, forget it, you lost your opportunity, now I get to burn you like I always wanted to do, you know? No, I mean, if God wants them to repent, what compels him to reject any repentance that might come afterwards? Now, of course, that raises questions.

We don't know that anyone could repent afterwards, but the Universalist says, there are indeed people who will go to hell and will burn and be punished, but not forever. Everyone has his limit. At some point, everyone will repent.

And that's what God wants. Now, they say that's an important thing to allow for because annihilation or eternal torment both include suffering that has no redemption in view as a possibility. Only the Christian Universalism holds out redemption as a possible outcome for the suffering.

And any other view has suffering just for suffering's sake. Even annihilationism that doesn't have people suffer forever. People suffer for a while, then they're annihilated.

What was gained by their suffering? Just God taking out his anger on them? Well, I think God's more merciful than I am, and I don't feel the need to take out my anger on someone who is not going to do him any good. I mean, it's hard to say. Universalism takes seriously the idea that God is sovereign, and God wants all people to be saved, and God ultimately will get what he wants.

That's what they think. Now, this starts with the fact that God desires all people to be saved. There's many verses in the Bible that say it.

First Timothy 2.4 says God would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. John 3.16 says God so loved the world. That's the whole world.

He loves everybody. That he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. Ezekiel 18.23 and 32 says God has no pleasure in the death of those who die.

He wants them to be saved. He wants them to repent. So, there's no question from the

standpoint of scripture that God, if he could have his way, would have everyone saved.

He doesn't want anyone to not be saved. Second point is that Jesus died to redeem the whole world. John the Baptist said in John 1.28, Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

In 1 John 2.2, John says Jesus is the propitiation for our sins and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. That means he died for the sins of everybody. In 1 Timothy 2.6, it says Jesus gave his life a ransom for all.

So, these two points, God wants everyone to be saved and Jesus paid for everyone to be saved, leads to the next important argument for universalism. And that is that if not all that Jesus paid for are ultimately redeemed, then God is the cosmic loser for all eternity. And yet the Bible constantly talks about God as being the winner, the victory of Christ over Satan.

If God wanted everyone to be saved but the devil got in and got some people to not be saved and God couldn't help it, and he wants them saved, he paid for them to be saved, but he loses them anyway for all eternity. Then who won in the final analysis, in all eternity? The devil, not God. And yet there's many things in scripture that talk about Jesus as the victor who conquered the devil and says in 1 John 3.8, for this purpose the Son of God was manifested that he might undo the works of the devil.

There's a really great scripture in Isaiah chapter 42, which is quoted in the New Testament about Christ. I like the way it reads in Isaiah even a little better than the way it's quoted from the Septuagint in the New Testament. But it says this, Behold my servant, which is Christ, whom I uphold, my elect one, in whom my soul delights, I have put my spirit on him.

He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out, nor raise his voice, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, a smoking flax he will not quench.

He will bring forth justice for truth. He will not fail, nor be discouraged, until he has established justice in the earth and the coastlands shall await his law. This idea that Jesus will not fail, he will not be discouraged until he has accomplished what he intended to do in saving the world.

This is a scripture that post-millennialists would like, also universalists would like. I mean, the scripture says, Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And, you know, I always had ways of understanding these scriptures without being universalist, but when I back away from my prejudice, I realize these kind of sound more like universalist kind of things.

Everyone's eventually going to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. And why not? He

bought them. He paid for them.

And yet, if he doesn't get them, then he paid for something he didn't get. And so he's the loser. That doesn't sit well with the very tone of the New Testament.

And universalists have trouble with that suggestion. Four, the Bible speaks in terms of universal salvation and restoration lots of times. First Timothy 4:10, it says, God is the savior of all men, especially those who believe.

Now, see, those who believe now would be ruling in eternity over those who didn't believe now. But he's the savior of all men. Those who believe have a special privilege, of course, but all men, he's the savior.

That's a hard one to, I've always had a hard time understanding that scripture. But if universalism is true, it wouldn't be hard to understand it that way. Romans 5, 18 and 19 talks about how, as in Adam, all men were condemned.

So in Christ, all men are justified. Not automatically, but it certainly indicates the idea of as much ruin as Adam did. Could Adam hurt the human race more than Christ could save it? That's, I guess, one way to look at it.

Is Christ not more powerful to redeem than Adam is to ruin? And it says in Romans 5, 18, therefore, as through one man's offense, judgment came on all men, which is universal, all humanity, resulting in condemnation. Even so, through one man's righteous act, the free gift came to all men. Is that the same all men? Or different all men? Condemnation came to all men through Adam.

So through Christ's righteous act, justification comes to all men. You see, universalists say the Bible has always taught universalism. And four of the six schools of Christianity taught it for the first four centuries, they say.

I'm not convinced of it myself. But you can see there's reasons for evangelicals to consider that this is one of the options that Christians have held. Origen is usually the church father who is most famous for being a universalist.

That's why many people consider he was a heretic because he was a universalist. But he was an evangelical. He was a martyr, too.

His dad was a martyr. At age 16, he became the head of the school in Alexandria because he was such a prodigy, a child prodigy. And he was very beloved and respected throughout the Mediterranean world during his lifetime.

He died as a martyr, but because he was a universalist, a lot of moderns call him a heretic. He might have been wrong. But there are some other scriptures just to look at real quickly that the universalists use.

Colossians 1, 19 and 20 says, For it pleased the Father that in Christ all fullness should dwell and by him to reconcile all things to himself, to him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of his cross, that through Christ it pleased God to reconcile all things to himself. That sounds kind of universalistic. Ephesians 1, 9 and 10 is a similar passage.

Ephesians 1, 9 and 10, Having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in himself, that, in the dispensation of the fullness of times, he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth, in him. Now those verses in Colossians and Ephesians sound like God's purpose is to get everything back, to reconcile everything to himself, to lose nothing, to have everything gathered together in Christ when all is said and done. And that's what universalists believe is the case.

After death, the wicked will be punished proportionally, according to this view, to their guilt, or until they are brought to repentance. And then they'll be restored to God. There is no obvious reason, and I made this point a moment ago, in scripture or logic, why God, who desires that all would repent and who will accept the genuine repentance of a lifelong sinner, even in the moment before death, would arbitrarily declare death to be the cut-off point for any opportunity to repent and be forgiven.

Seven, given enough pressure and time, all men will ultimately repent. This is the belief of the universalists, if not before death, then afterward. And finally, and I made this point too, no, I didn't.

There's nothing in this teaching to offend the sentiments of godly Christ followers. In fact, it is the view that would most satisfy those who share God's heartfelt desire for salvation of the lost. Now, there are some people, believe it or not, Christians who don't like universalism. Calvinists don't.

I had a guy who used to call me on the radio all the time from Connecticut, and he would be on debates on the website a lot, and he was a universalist. And he said he'd talk to Calvinists in chat rooms, and he'd say, well, okay, maybe you don't believe universalism is true. But if it was true, would that make you unhappy? And they said, you bet it would make us unhappy.

There'd be no chance for God to show his wrath, you know, ultimately. I mean, these Calvinists were like, they'd be disappointed if everyone was saved. I wouldn't.

And if you say, well, wait a minute, how come I have to serve God all my life, and these people live in sin, and we both end up in heaven? Well, do you begrudge them that? I mean, would you be sad if God forgave them at the last moment on their deathbed? And if not there, how about after that? You know, when do you want God to cut them off? Well, the universalist says God doesn't ever cut us off, but that some people after death

will be punished in hell, in the lake of fire, until they can be brought to true repentance. And that's the universalist position, and God will take them back, and he will reconcile and gather together in him all things, ultimately, in the fullness of time. Interesting concept, probably one you weren't aware of.

I certainly wasn't. I knew about annihilationism before I knew about Christian universalism. And yet, I think Christian universalism has more of a history in the early church than annihilationism.

But I still think annihilationism may have more scripture in its favor. And we'll take that now. I realize we're late.

We'll run through this pretty quickly. The argument for conditional immortality, the position is this. People are not born immortal.

They can become immortal as the gift of God, through faith. We are given eternal life as a gift of God when we believe. Prior to that, we are not immortal.

And those who never believe are never immortal, because it's not in human nature to be immortal. In fact, only God is immortal. There's an important verse to the conditionalists in 1 Timothy 6.16. Speaking of Christ or of God, it says, Who alone has immortality? It says that God or Christ alone has immortality.

Now, that alone emphasizes that no one shares that quality with Him. Only God is immortal. Now, we can only become immortal by being in Him.

And we know that it says in 1 John 5, chapter 5, verses 11 and 12, this is the message that God has given to us. Eternal life in this life is in His Son. He that has the Son has life.

He that has not the Son of God has not life. That means He has not eternal life. Now, of course, we've always known the verses that say that only believers have eternal life.

But those who believe in the traditional view of eternal torment would say, well, when we talk about eternal life, we're talking about a quality of life. When eternal life isn't just endless life, it's a quality of life. And only believers have this high quality of life that comes from being united with Christ in eternity and so forth.

But everyone has life eternally. But what unbelievers have for eternity isn't really living or something. I mean, it's just not worth calling life.

But that's an expedient, that's a dodge, it seems to me. Nowhere does it say that unbelievers have eternal life in any form in the Bible. And it does say that God alone possesses immortality.

He shares his own immortal life with those who believe in Christ. John 10, 28, Jesus said, I'm the shepherd of the sheep. My sheep know my voice and I give them eternal life.

OK, so a follower of Christ is given eternal life by Christ. In Romans 2, 7, Paul talks about two classes of people on the day of judgment and what they get. And it's interesting that the believer is described in these terms as, well, verse 6 and 7, Romans 2, 6 and 7, who will render to each one according to his deeds, eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality.

Eternal life will be given to those who are seeking for immortality. Well, don't they have it naturally? Aren't all humans immortal? Apparently not. He will give eternal life to those who seek for immortality in the proper manner, which is through seeking God and coming into relation with Christ.

So this idea that man is not naturally immortal, but has to seek immortality, and has to receive it as a gift from God, its condition upon faith would suggest that the unbeliever then isn't immortal. And if he's not immortal, then he can't suffer endlessly. The fate of the wicked is described in scripture using terms such as destroy, perish, consume, and death.

Never terms like eternal torment. But there's a number of scriptures, we don't have time to look at it all, but one or a few important ones would be Matthew 10, 28, where Jesus said, don't fear him who can kill the body no more, but fear him who can destroy the body and the soul in hell or Gehenna. Now, the body and the soul can be destroyed.

That's the important thing to know. Jesus said the soul is not indestructible. The body and the soul, he says, God is able to destroy in hell.

And so it is possible for the soul to cease living along with the body when it dies. There's other scriptures that talk about whosoever believes in him shall not perish. What does perish mean? What does death mean? What does destruction mean? What does being consumed mean by flames? These are the terms that the Bible consistently uses of the lot of the lost, which sound kind of final.

Those words sound like they cease to exist, at least in a conscious form. Now, the lost really do lose out forever. Their loss is eternal in this viewpoint, because what they lose out on is eternal life and they lose out on it forever.

Once they're annihilated, they don't have a chance again. You know, they're gone and it's an eternal loss. It's an eternal punishment.

It's an eternal destruction, as the Bible says. But it's not necessarily ever said to be an eternal torment. Eternal loss of those who finally rebel is the terrible cost that God himself endures out of his determination to honor the creature's freedom of choice.

However, he will not have to eternally endure the heartache of knowing that millions of his offspring are being tormented endlessly. It's sad enough that some have to be lost, but at least if they're annihilated, he doesn't have to worry that they're suffering forever

and ever and ever and ever. And frankly, if any of my children were lost, it'd be horrible, even if I knew they're annihilated.

But it'd be tolerable because I'd know when they're annihilated, at least they're not going to suffer anymore. They missed out on living with me and with Jesus forever, which I would love to have them do. And they've really lost a big thing.

But at least I can rest in knowing that they are no longer suffering. I don't see how I could possibly rest knowing they were, or how God could either, since he loves them. The lost will be resurrected.

Jesus said that in John 5, 28 and 29. Paul also said it in Acts 24, 15. There's a resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous.

Along with the righteous, in order to face the judgment, upon being condemned, they will suffer punishment proportionate to their guilt. And then they'll be allowed to pass into natural non-existence, the same condition they were in before they were born. In the end, it'll be as if they never existed.

That would be the annihilationist position. It's still sad, very sad. And they've lost out eternally.

But it's more tolerable for the sentimental Christian, I think, and for the sentimental God, than the traditional view would be to understand, I think. Seven, though this view does not have the happy ending that does Christian universalism, it nonetheless ends with a tolerable and just resolution of the problem of sin in the world. It takes seriously the scriptures about the eternal forfeiture of eternal life by those who die in rebellion against Christ.

Remember, eternal torment never solves anything, because it never ends. There's never really a resolution. Sin is never fully punished.

It's continually being punished forever and ever and ever. This at least brings God's judgment to a just and final resolution, which we would think God would wish to do, and which I think we have no reason biblically to say he won't do. There are some objections to this.

And the one that has always been a problem to me has been Lazarus and the rich man. In Luke chapter 16, verses 19 to the end of the chapter, there's a story about two men who died, a rich man and a beggar. Lazarus was the name of the beggar.

And in hell, the rich man was tormented in flames. He looked across the chasm, he saw Abraham and Lazarus there, and they were all conscious. They were all dead, but conscious.

They were in Hades, but the good and the bad were both conscious, which kind of feeds the idea that even the bad live on immortally. They have a mortal soul that goes on after death. I've always been pretty strong in saying this is not just a parable.

This is an actual story. There are some indicators that it sounds like it is, but I didn't realize until fairly recently that the story didn't originate with Jesus. He's quoting a story that was in a work hundreds of years earlier of pagan origin.

It's the Gemara Babylonicum, it was called. And according to several sources I've checked, the story of Lazarus and dives, you know how the Catholics call it dives? Jesus doesn't, but dives means rich man. And apparently the story of Lazarus and dives comes from an earlier work that the Jews were familiar with.

Jesus knew therefore, it's like he's quoting a popular, like if we quote something from Aesop's fables or something like that to make a point. And I have done that preaching before. I've quoted from Aesop's fables to make a point, without suggesting that the fable is true.

And without even suggesting that the fable is true to life. You know, a donkey finds a lion skin and goes about getting a lot of respect that he never had before because everyone thinks he's a lion until he decides to roar. And then he goes hee-haw and everyone knows he's not a lion.

Okay, that's Aesop's fable. That has a lot of applications that could be made to the Christian life, could be used in a sermon. But no one is actually saying that donkeys could really consciously disguise themselves as lions.

I mean, it's not anything anyone would believe. And some say that the story of Lazarus was not a true story. It comes from hundreds of years earlier from an earlier document, commonly circulated, known.

And that it was not that Jesus was trying to affirm it as true or even as a true situation. But he was making a point about the Pharisees and their disdain for people like the Gentiles and sinners among Israel, who were like the poor man. And we won't go into it right now.

Suffice it to say, there are some reasons to believe that the story of Lazarus and the Pharisees may not be a proof of the idea that there is an immortal soul. If it is, it is the only scripture. It was the only scripture I could ever find to try to document that an unbeliever would live on after the grave.

Now, I always had a bit of a problem even with it, even when I believed it. Because it means, if this is true, that Cain, for example, who died 6,000 years ago, has been tormented in these flames for 6,000 years. The rich man Jesus spoke of has only been there for about 2,000.

And some people who died yesterday have only been there for a few days. And if Jesus came back next week, there'd be people who only were tormented there for a day or an hour before he came back. And how fair is that? Is Cain's sin so much greater than Adolf Hitler's? Both of them are in the flames, but Cain's been there for 6,000 years longer than Hitler.

You know, is that really, is Cain really that bad? That's the hard thing. It was hard to see how that was fair. I mean, if all had eternal torment because all sins were equal, that's fine if all sins are equal.

But whether they're equal or not, for one man to spend 6,000 years in torment, another man only has to spend one year if Jesus comes back a year after he dies. I wasn't sure how that could be called proportionate or fair. It's much more fair if it is assumed that the dead died, the wicked dead died, and they have no consciousness at all.

They're raised to the judgment and then they're given the proportionate punishment and then annihilated. Obviously, I'm presenting both of these views as if I could have sympathy for them. And I could.

I'm very attracted to the universalist view, but I think there's a stronger case for the annihilationist view, frankly, biblically. But I don't know which is true. I'm not going to decide which one's true by what I like.

But I'm relieved to learn that there may be a biblical case for something other than the eternal torment view, because it's always had serious problems associated with it, even scriptural problems. If we say that man isn't immortal, though, what about ghosts? What do we do about mediums and ghosts and stuff and haunted houses? Aren't there all those spirits of people who've died? Probably not Christians. They're not in the presence of God.

Non-Christians. Are there ghosts around? We have no way of knowing for sure that they really are. Most Christians, even those who believe in the immortality of the soul, don't believe that ghosts and haunted houses are really manifestations of human spirits, but believe they're demonic spirits impersonating humans.

Whether this is true or not, we don't know because the Bible doesn't say. Only once in the Bible does a seance actually produce the real person for sure. And that was Samuel, but he wasn't one of the wicked.

We have reason to believe Samuel was immortal because he's a believer. But if he had been a non-Christian who was brought up, then we'd have something to wonder about. His soul's still alive, even though he's dead.

We don't have anything in the Bible, except possibly the story of Lazarus and the rich man, that would suggest that an unbeliever is alive somewhere after he dies. And the

story of Lazarus and the rich man is, all I can say is I have less confidence in it being a true story than I once did. Maybe it is.

And I simply can't be dogmatic about this. As I said at the beginning, I'm not going to tell you which view is correct. I'm going to tell you what the three views are and what the arguments are.

But this is the first time in public that I have said I have my doubts about the traditional view. And I'm of the opinion that as I continue, I may never know in this life. And it's OK because I don't feel like I have to.

But it's a relief to know that maybe the eternal term of view might not be true. I mean, that's good enough. If it is true, then it must be right and just and good.

And when we get there, we'll somehow see how that is right and just and good. But it's nice to know it might not be true. Maybe something much better is really the way things are going to turn out.

And frankly, even when it comes to witnessing to people, I'm glad to know. I'm glad to say I'm uncertain about this. It used to be they say, well, how could God make people burn forever in hell? And I try to justify it to them and so forth.

And it never seemed to work because nonbeliever could never appreciate it. And believers have a hard enough time appreciating it. I'm glad to be able to say with all integrity, you know, I've studied the Bible on this quite a bit.

And frankly, I'm not so sure the Bible does say that anyone's going to be tormented forever and ever. I'm not sure because the Bible doesn't tell us exactly in unambiguous terms what the fate of the lost is. But the Bible does say that the fate is so bad, you'd be a lot better off being thrown into the ocean with a millstone around your neck, or you'd be better off having your eye plucked out and your ear plucked, your hand cut off and your foot cut off than going there.

I mean, let's face it. If it's better to be maimed and blind and thrown off the pier with a rock around your neck, then go there. It's a bad thing.

And you don't have to go there. You should avoid it at all costs. You know, I mean, whether you're annihilated after being punished, even if you're redeemed after being punished, the punishment to say that if I would say I don't believe in eternal torment anymore, that doesn't mean I don't believe in something really bad.

To say that the fate of the lost might be better than eternal torment is not saying much because everything's better than eternal torment. Even torment for a million years is better than eternal torment. So I mean, there's no assurance in any of these views that the sinner somehow gets away with his sin and doesn't suffer dire, dire consequences for

it.

But what the Bible certainly teaches is that God gives sinners what they truly deserve and what justice demands. And whether that is they have to be punished until they repent or they're punished until they're annihilated or they're punished forever and ever and ever, that's something I think Christians will not come to full agreement on ever on this side of eternity. We'll know eventually, but we don't have to know now, except we need to know people need to avoid it.

People need Jesus. People need to be saved. And whatever happens to those who aren't is really, really a bad deal.

Its exact nature we'll have to remain uncertain about. Well, I should say I have to remain uncertain about. Maybe you looking at the evidence for three immediately, oh, this is clearly the one that's right and the others are clearly wrong.

I don't see it that way. I mean, some may get it before I do. But anyway, that's that's all we have time for.

In fact, more than we had time for.