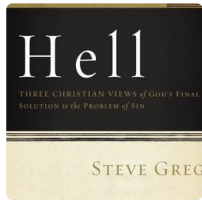


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Three Views of Hell (Part 1)



Three Views of Hell - Steve Gregg

In this discussion about the biblical concept of Hell, Steve Gregg considers three views held by Christians. The traditional view, held by many conservative evangelicals, is eternal torment in Hell for the wicked. Gregg then discusses universalism, the possibility that all souls will eventually be reconciled with God, and annihilationism, the belief that those who cannot be saved will simply cease to exist. While Gregg does not endorse a specific view, he emphasizes that it is essential to consider how one's beliefs about Hell can impact evangelism, and notes that none of the views he mentions allows sinners to avoid judgement.

Transcript

Tonight we're going to be talking about the subject of Hell, or at least the subject of what is the final disposition of unbelievers after death, or we might say after the Judgment Day. There are varieties of views among Christians, both on the subject of what happens immediately after death, to Christians and non-Christians alike. And there's also controversy as to what happens not only just after death, but after the Day of Judgment.

Because after you die, there's an interim period until Jesus comes back, but when He comes back, there's a Judgment Day. And all will be resurrected and go to judgment, and then the eternal fate of all persons will be actualized. And we know from what the Scripture says that those who are in Christ will go into an everlasting kingdom of righteousness and joy and enjoyment of God, fellowship with Christ.

These are the things that await the Christian. But what awaits the non-Christian? What about the person who is not saved? The person who does not die on good terms with God and finds himself on the last day before a holy God, facing judgment, facing condemnation. Because they have not been justified.

They have not put their faith in Jesus Christ. So they stand in their sins before God and must receive the appropriate judgment and condemnation. What happens to them? Well, anyone who's been a Christian for any length of time knows that there is at least, I guess, what we could call the traditional view.

By saying traditional, I don't mean to say it's not the correct view because some traditions are true. Some traditions are not true. But the most, or I should say the least we can say about the eternal torment view of hell is that it is indeed the traditional view because it has been taught from very early times.

Most of the early church fathers said something or another about eternal judgment, though in many cases their statements were as vague as the actual statements of Scripture on the subject. You didn't know those statements of Scripture were vague? Well, we'll see what the Scriptures actually do say and what various Christians have thought about the meaning of those Scriptures. But there were a variety of views on the ultimate destiny of the lost, at least in the third and fourth centuries.

There were three different views. There was one view which has become the traditional view. It became the official view of the Roman Catholic Church, and it was retained in the Reformation by the Protestant denominations, and it is still the view of the vast majority of evangelicals.

In fact, I would say most evangelicals, it's the only view they're familiar with. And that is the view that when a person dies lost and stands before a holy God on the day of judgment and is condemned by that God on that day of judgment, that person is consigned to what the Bible calls the lake of fire. And the lake of fire is what we have traditionally called hell.

Now, there are some problems with the use of the word hell. We're going to talk about exactly what words in the Bible actually refer to this phenomenon of hell. Hell is obviously an English word, so it's not found in the Greek or Hebrew Bible, but it is used in the English translations to translate certain Hebrew and Greek words, either appropriately or not, which we'll talk about.

Nonetheless, the word hell, as it has traditionally come to be understood by Christians, refers to the same thing as what Revelation calls the lake of fire. There we read it's a lake that burns with fire and brimstone. We read expressions like they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

At least that is said of the beast and the false prophet when they're thrown there. It says they should be tormented day and night forever and ever. Of all those who worship the beast, we're told in Revelation 14, 11, that the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, and they have no rest day nor night.

Jesus said in Mark chapter 9 that it's much better to pluck out an eye if it causes you to sin or cut off a hand or a foot if it causes you to sin and thereby to be admitted into life than to retain both eyes, both hands, both feet and be cast into Gehenna, traditionally translated hell, where he says the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. And so we have these images in scripture of what sounds like a place of eternal punishment

and torment for the lost. So the traditional view of hell is that the lake of fire is a place where people are thrown and that is in fact referred to in Revelation chapter 20 and verse 15 as the second death.

But traditionally it is not viewed as much of a death at all, but more like survival forever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever in a very unpleasant situation. Unpleasant is a euphemism. It would be more like torment and torture forever and ever and ever.

And I know this is the view I was raised in. I was raised a Baptist, conservative, evangelical. When I moved into more non-denominational evangelical charismatic circles, it remained the only view I ever heard.

I was aware that there were people who had other views, religious people, and their institutions were called churches, but I consider them cults. There were, for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses. They do not have the eternal torment view of hell.

They believe in something called annihilation. They believe that when a person dies, if they are not saved, they are burned up and they suffer no longer. They are just gone.

They are annihilated. And then among Unitarians, another group I consider a cult, there were those who believe that everybody is saved. This is called universalism.

And so in my experience growing up, I knew there were some people who did not believe in eternal hell, eternal torment. There were some who were annihilationists and there were some who were universalists. But I did not consider either view to be within the realm of evangelical biblical theology.

I considered that those who believed one or the other of these were cultists. Now I had a little more problem with the Seventh-day Adventists because I do not consider Seventh-day Adventists to be cultists. Seventh-day Adventists are not heretics in the sense that I regard the Jehovah's Witnesses to be, but the Seventh-day Adventists also believe in annihilation.

But about 10 or 15 years ago, I suppose it was, it must be close to 15 now, I began to read writings by evangelicals whom I had known from other writings of theirs to be not only mainstream evangelicals, but respected evangelicals. People like John R. W. Stott, probably the primary evangelical leader in England. Men like Clark Pinnock, a Canadian Bible scholar who wrote books about the inerrancy of Scripture when I was young that I quoted from extensively when I was defending the inspiration of the Bible.

Definitely a man with evangelical credentials. And they were espousing 15 years ago or so a different view on hell than the traditional view. And they were saying, they were not saying this on the basis of adherence to some cultic group or any liberalism on their part.

They were actually saying this is what they're reading from the Bible. And I thought, how can anyone get that from the Bible? And over the years, I've become aware of two alternatives to the traditional view of hell, which are held by evangelicals. Now, when I say evangelicals, what I mean is people who believe in the absolute authority and inspiration of the Scripture.

We're not talking about liberals. Now, there's always been liberals who didn't believe in eternal hell. I mean, liberal theology has always been characterized by denial of some of what I consider to be the fundamental doctrines of evangelicalism.

They deny the virgin birth. They deny the resurrection of Christ. They deny hell, the resurrection, like the Sadducees did.

But we're talking now not about liberals and not about cultists, but about mainstream evangelicals who from their exegesis of the Scripture have said, you know, this doctrine of eternal torment is not necessarily taught with any clarity in Scripture. And some other view is, they feel. And the other views are, as it turns out, annihilationism and universalism.

Now, this will, I'm sure, surprise most of you, and it surprised me. For the past ten years or so that I have answered Bible questions for people, when people ask me about hell, I said, well, I believe the traditional view of eternal torment. But I'm aware that there are some evangelicals who hold this view, some who hold that view.

And I tried to give a little bit of the scriptural case for each view. But I was still pretty solidly in the traditional camp. I have to say right now my views are kind of up for grabs about this.

So, it's going to be easy for me to be objective here. I'm not going to be trying to put a spin on one of these views and say, this is now the right view. It seems to me that there's a very similar case to be made biblically for each of these views.

So, that might surprise you as it surprised me to find out. What's more, I was surprised to find out that in the fourth century, there were six major Christian schools in the Christian centers. Places like Antioch and Alexandria and Jerusalem and Ephesus and Rome and Edessa.

There were six major Christian schools in the fourth century. One of them, the one in Rome, notably, where the Roman Catholic Church grew out of, taught the eternal torment view of hell. One of them, and I believe it was the church in Ephesus, or the school in Ephesus, taught annihilationism.

And the other four taught Christian universalism, which I believe they were strongly influenced by a man of Alexandria named Origen, who has long been known to have been a Christian universalist. But when we say universalism, we're not talking about

Unitarianism. We're not talking about new age ideas that everyone goes to heaven because God doesn't care what you believe.

All religions are the same to God. You know, sin isn't all that bad. God is just too nice to really punish people.

I mean, this new age Unitarian idea of universalism kind of just takes all of the backbone out of God. And it's like he doesn't really care that much about sin. He's just a nice guy.

He wouldn't really, doesn't have the heart to punish people. That's not what this, the universalism that some evangelicals hold is a universalism that has a hell in it. There is a hell.

And it's a hell of fire. It's a hell of punishment. It's just not an eternal hell.

It's a purging kind of a hell. It's a hellish experience which in their view will lead people ultimately to repentance and that God will accept their repentance after death just as he would have accepted it before their death. On this view, there's nothing obvious about death that makes it the cutoff point that God says, well, I really wanted you to get saved before now, but now I just can't do anything for you even if you repent.

You know, I mean, the idea here is we all know that God would accept repentance on a deathbed. Repentance, the thief on the cross being an example. Most of us believe, I think, at least I do, that if Hitler had repented or if Charles Manson would repent on his deathbed, that God would forgive him and that he'd go to heaven.

But most of us believe that if he doesn't repent on his deathbed, but he repents a moment after death, God will say, sorry, snooze you lose, lost your opportunity. I really wanted you to save then, but I don't want you to save now. Or I could have forgiven you then, but there's something about me I can't forgive you now.

Somehow death is the magic line which once one crosses over it, although God would have forgiven him any time before that, he just can't forgive him after that. Universalists say, why not? Universalists say, why does it say that in the Bible? And this is where, when I say universalists, I'm talking about Christian universalists, and most of them don't want to call themselves universalists. They would call themselves universal reconciliation, the universal reconciliation camp.

That's one of the alternate views that's out there. The other is the one that I referred to as annihilationism earlier. I heard of it as annihilationism when taught by Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, but actually the evangelicals who hold this view, and that's the view that John R. W. Stott and Clark Pinnock, some of these leading evangelicals, have now come to believe the Bible teaches.

They don't call it annihilationism. They call it conditional immortality, the conditional

immortality view. The essence of this view is that immortality is not an innate condition of human nature, that people are not born immortal.

Especially, God said, the wages of sin is death. The soul that sins, it shall die. In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.

Those who receive Christ shall not perish, but have everlasting life. The fate of the lost is that they come to an end of their life, and it's the end of their life. It's over.

Period. They get no more. They perish.

They die. But they're not immortal. Because of sin, man does not possess immortality.

But man can receive as a gift immortality through faith in Jesus Christ. When a person believes in Christ, he receives eternal life as a gift. So, this is called the view of conditional immortality.

Man can have immortality, but does not possess it as a default state of nature. Does not possess it as an unconditional grant. But immortality is given as a gift to those who receive Jesus Christ.

They're given eternal life. That's the conditional immortality view. Now, I haven't told you which view I believe in.

I'll tell you what. I'll tell you right now. I don't know which view I believe.

I lean toward one more than the others. You may be able to tell which one it'll be as we go through. But even that, I don't lean so much more strongly toward the one than the others that it would necessarily come out of my speaking, I hope.

I want you simply to know what the Scriptures say on each of these things. It may be that to you instantly you'll say, well, this view is clearly not scriptural. Once you see the evidence, you'll say, that's just twisting scripture.

That's not convincing. Or it may be that you'll go out of here saying, you know, there's a lot more of a biblical case for this view and this view and this view than I would have ever dreamed. That's where I'm at.

And that's after 15 years of reading the evidence for all the different views. I'm a slow learner. I've always said that.

When it comes to Revelation, I'm an amillennialist. I'm a preterist. But I wasn't a dispensationalist who read a good preterist book and became a preterist.

I became a preterist over a period of 10 or 12 years of studying this and gradually, very slowly reaching that conclusion. Same thing with my amillennialism. I'm a slow learner.

Someday I might be able to say, yes, it is this view of hell that is correct. These others, too, are wrong. But I'm not there yet because at this point I'm impressed, more than I ever dreamed I would be, with the strength of the biblical case for each of these views.

Actually, I should say more than I ever thought I would be for the two alternate views. I was always relatively impressed with the case for the eternal torment view. I was raised with it.

And by the way, I had to deal with it all the time because it's objectionable to unbelievers anyway and even to believers. Let's face it. The idea that unbelievers will be tormented forever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever without any relief, it kind of goes against your sensitivities unless you don't have any.

Now, if you do have some, you wonder, how can that be right? How can God do that? And what the average evangelical does, as I did, is say, well, God is fair. God knows what's right. If this is the way it is, it must be right in ways that maybe I'm not capable of understanding.

I'm just going to trust God because if the word of God says it, hey, God said it, I believe that that settles it. That's where I've been at. And in dealing with unbelievers and believers who have given me objections over the years, all my life I've had to handle objections to this traditional view of hell, I've always vindicated God and said, listen, you know, sin is much more terrible than you think it is.

People would say, well, how can it be that if a person sins every day of their life and lives 80 years and dies and they've sinned for 80 years, how can that justify torment for millions and millions and millions of years? I don't care how many sins you commit in 80 years. That's a finite number of sins in a finite period. How can that somehow be balanced out with billions and billions? And that's just beginning of years of torment.

And what I would say in answer to that, it would be, well, you know, the magnitude of a sin is not determined by how long it takes to commit it. Some of the greatest crimes for which we would wish to affix the strongest penalties can be committed in an instant. Murder, for example.

Whereas, you know, robbing a liquor store, someone might plot how to do that for a month before they do it. But we wouldn't want to give them the same penalty as a murderer who just in an act of anger, you know, walks into a store and starts shooting people. Obviously, we would recognize that a magnitude of a crime is not determined by the length of time it takes to commit.

Therefore, crimes committed in a finite period might be infinitely profound in terms of their magnitude and what they deserve in terms of punishment. And sin against an infinite being could be of infinite magnitude and require infinite punishment. So, I mean,

I had all these reasonings and frankly, those statements strike me as possibly true.

I'm not saying those were invalid statements. I think those are valid statements. The only reason I would waffle on it now is because in looking at the scriptures themselves, I see much less certainty or reasons for certainty that the Bible even teaches these things.

It might. And what I want to do is look at the scriptural case for the traditional view and for the universal reconciliation view and for the conditional immortality view and leave you with the case and let you chew on it for the next 15 years like I have. And maybe 15 years from now, you'll have an opinion.

Now, by way of introduction, I want to say that it's important that we do not decide which view of hell we're going to adhere to based upon our preferences because God is not obligated to do things the way that we would prefer. And especially since God knows a lot more than we do. After all, we know that God had all the men, women, and children of Canaan wiped out at the edge of the sword of the Israelites.

That offends some of our sensitivities. But I'm sure that's only because we don't know as much about the Canaanites as God knew. God has never yet issued an order to punish a sinner more than that sinner deserved.

Man and man's laws and man's courts may punish disproportionate crimes, but God does not. God's law is just and holy and good. Even Paul said that in Romans chapter 7. I know that the law is holy, just, and good.

Whatever God penalizes a sinner with is a just penalty. It's not too strict and it's not too light. Now, I sometimes don't know why a whole society needs to be wiped out, but God knows more than I do about what those people are doing, what those people are thinking, what their motives are, and therefore what they deserve.

Likewise, when it comes to what God will do in punishing sinners ultimately after the day of judgment, God knows what they deserve. And if what He has revealed goes against my preferences or my sensitivities, all the worse for my preferences and my sensitivities, because God is not obligated to cater to my sensitivities or my preferences. God is sovereign and wise and good, and whatever He does is right.

And I believe that's true regardless which view of hell ends up being what the Bible teaches. The important thing from the outset is that we recognize that it is not our preferences, but the revelation from God's Word that has to be what decides the matter. And if the most unpopular of views is taught clearly in the Scriptures, then we must accept the most unpopular views without apology, because God is wiser than we are.

It should be understood, though, that one's view of hell reflects directly on one's view of the character of God and the nature of God. Obviously, those who do not like the doctrine of eternal torment have a view of the character of God that God is somewhat

more compassionate, too merciful to take that approach to punishing sin. Those who seem to see a certain justice and rightness about the eternal torment view of hell tend to see God's holiness and His offended dignity as the ultimate thing that needs to be vindicated, and nothing less than eternal torment adequately reprises for and redresses sins against the dignity of a holy and infinite God.

The character of God is reflected in the judgments He meets, and our perception of the character of God will go a long way toward determining our perception of what is the judgment He should and will mete out in particular cases. And we know this, and this is an important thing to do, is to consider how our view of hell impacts evangelism. Just today I got received an email from someone who'd been reading on our forum, on our website we have a Bible forum where there's some discussion of this on one of the threads.

And the guy was saying, I don't know which view is true now. But he said, what I want to know from you is what do I tell an unbeliever if they say, if I reject Jesus, am I going to burn forever? He said, what am I supposed to say? Well, I'm not in crisis about that. Evangelicalism in America for the past 200 years has leaned heavily on what we call hellfire and brimstone evangelistic methods.

Not as much recently. I admit, we don't hear much hellfire preaching anymore. Keith Green said, whenever someone says to him, I'm tired of all this hellfire preaching, he says, when's the last time you ever heard any? Well, frankly, you don't hear very much anymore.

But that's just so in the last few decades, it seems to me, that evangelicalism, especially revivalism and so forth from Moody and Billy Sunday and so forth, laid heavy stress on hellfire and brimstone. And it had a powerful impact on urging sinners to get right with God, to get saved. And some people say, well, what if we would begin to waffle on it? What if we began to say, well, maybe it isn't eternal dormant.

Maybe people would have no incentive to get saved. I mentioned I'm teaching through the book of Acts in another class in another location. And as I'm going through, I'm looking again at all the sermons in the book of Acts.

And one thing I've noticed is that Peter and Paul and Stephen, the people whose sermons are recorded for us in the book of Acts, they mention neither heaven nor hell in their sermons. They sometimes mention that there's a day of judgment. Paul said on Mars Hill, God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world through the man that He's appointed, Jesus Christ.

So there is a day of reckoning. But there is never in any of the sermons in Acts that I can recall any mention of hell or of heaven. Now, I believe in both.

I believe in hell and in heaven. But what's interesting is the apostles apparently did not lean on the threats of hell or the promise of heaven as giving their audience incentive to respond. They seem to think that simply by proclaiming the crown rights of the Lord Jesus Christ, that provided enough incentive for intelligent people to know what they ought to do.

That there would be some kind of reprisals for those who rebel against the Lord is not concealed. There is a day of reckoning. But they didn't have to go into detail as to what that was.

Draw your own conclusions. If God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ, and you die on His wrong side, well, let's just face it. It's not going to go well for you.

What exactly will happen when you burn forever? They didn't talk about that. In fact, it's interesting. There's no mention of hell in all the epistles.

The only mention of hell in the Bible appears to be in the teaching of Jesus and in the book of Revelation. And the things that are said in those places are subject to more than one way of being understood. Now, what there are in other places of the Bible are statements that might give rise to an alternative view than the traditional view of hell.

But the point is, what is the impact that rethinking this subject might have on evangelism? Most people who hold the traditional view, what I hear them say is, if we soften this teaching of eternal torment, it will negatively impact evangelism because people won't be frightened enough. They won't be taking it seriously enough. They'll think that they can reject Christ and get off easy.

But you know what? If you really understand even the alternative views of conditional immortality and universal reconciliation, neither of them have the sinner getting off easy. Both of those views have a hell, a hell of fire, a hell of punishment. They just don't have a hell that lasts forever and ever.

In the case of conditional immortality, the view is, the unbeliever goes to a hell where he is tormented as long as he deserves to be tormented and no longer. And then he is annihilated. That is, hell is exactly proportionate to what a person deserves.

No more, no less. The universal reconciliation view is that the person is thrown into hell until they are induced to actually repent and to turn to Christ, as they should have done in their lifetime. And this might not be as easy for them after death.

I mean, frankly, most people, if you said, you are going to go burn in this oven until you repent, they would say, I will save you time. I will repent right now. But one has to wonder how sincere would that be? If they didn't repent without that threat in their lifetime, how sincerely would they be repenting if they are just trying to get out of the

punishment? But the universal reconciliation view would hold something like, it actually takes dealings of God and severe ones in their life to get them to a place where they can truly see the magnitude of their sin and the need to humbly repent before God.

These details are not explained very much in the writings of the people that I have read on these subjects. But I just want to say that none of the views lets the sinner off. All the views have a hell of punishment and torment.

It's just that only the traditional view has an eternal hell. The others have a hell that is as long as it should be or needs to be. And then there is either annihilation or reconciliation with God in the end.

Now, as opposed to being concerned about how a rethinking, even a softening of the idea of an eternal hell might negatively impact our ability to convert people, we might want to consider how much the assertion of the traditional view has hurt evangelism. There is at least one person sitting in this room who rejected God and Christianity during the early period of his life because of the traditional view of hell. It just made it seem like God was unfair, that God took a gratuitous delight in punishing people who didn't agree with him.

And it really made God out to seem like a different kind of God than the one Jesus talked about, who is the friend of sinners and who is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. And the God that was pictured in the mind of this person, and I'm sure many, many others like him, was not a God very much like the God Jesus talked about, and therefore not a God that was very attractive or very lovely, maybe a God that you would submit to out of craven fear of not being tortured forever, but certainly not one that you'd be very attracted to as someone you want to have a relationship with, or someone you'd love. And so getting some kind of a grasp on what the Bible really teaches on the subject of hell has an impact that we need to consider relative to how God is portrayed to the unbeliever.

Because God really does exist a certain way, and the truth of the judgment of God is a certain way, and that's the way the unbeliever needs to know it. We don't need to choose a view of hell based on how well we think it will manipulate people to believe such a thing. There are those who say that the traditional view of hell, though it's not clearly taught in scripture as much as evangelicals have believed it is, was strongly promoted during the Middle Ages by a church that needed something like that to keep people in line.

The illiterate, uneducated masses under the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Europe were kept faithful to a very unattractive religious system by an even less attractive prospect of hell. If they would reject that religious system. And the view became very entrenched, and whether the Bible teaches it or not is what we need to determine.

But even if the Bible did not teach it, it's easy to see how the view could have become prominent in the hands of a manipulative religious institution. So the real question is, is this traditional view continuing in evangelical circles merely on the strength of its momentum of having been the only view available for a thousand years in the Middle Ages taught by the Catholic Church? And like many other issues, the Reformers never questioned that particular doctrine, so they perpetuated it and it's just continued with us. Or is it still among us because the Bible clearly teaches it? Okay, now here's something that we need to understand that puts things into perspective.

The Old Testament never mentions hell. Now, if you have the King James Version, you'll find the word hell over 30 times in the Old Testament, but it's a mistranslation. I'm going to use the word hell as most people think of the word hell.

Hell, to the average person, is the place where people burn forever and ever, or we should say the place where sinners go after the Day of Judgment to their eternal destiny. The Old Testament never speaks of it. Now, when you find the word hell in the Old Testament, if you have the King James Version, you'll find the word hell there 30-something times.

It's always the Hebrew word sheol. Sheol, S-H-E-O-L. However, it becomes clear upon reading the texts in the Old Testament about sheol that this is not at all talking about what we call hell.

Sheol is not the place where the lost go after the Day of Judgment. Sheol is the place that all the dead go immediately when they die. And, in fact, sheol is sometimes simply translated the grave.

Other times, it's not translated the grave. Some translators have decided to leave it untranslated and just call it sheol. Because sheol in the Old Testament is where the righteous and the unrighteous go immediately upon death.

David indicated that if he were to die, he'd be in sheol. Do you remember Psalm 16? You will not leave my soul in sheol, neither will you let your Holy One see corruption. Or David said, In sheol can I praise you? Meaning, please don't kill me, God, right now because I can't praise you.

And it works out to be in sheol. One thing that's very clear is sheol is not the place of the wicked. Sheol is the place of the dead.

Sheol simply means the place of the dead or the condition of being dead. And we have an equivalent word in the New Testament. By the way, all the references to hell in the Old Testament are sheol.

And it does not refer to what we normally are thinking of when we talk about hell. When we normally think of hell, we're thinking of specifically the place of the lost for eternity.

We're not thinking of where everybody, all of us go until the Judgment Day.

But that's what sheol refers to. In the New Testament, the word hell is used a number of times in English translations. And there are three different words that are translated hell.

Only one of them arguably could refer to what we normally call hell. The most common word used for hell in the New Testament is the Greek word hades. Hades.

Now, hades is nothing else but the same thing as sheol. It's just Greek. Sheol is Hebrew.

Hades is Greek. They are equivalent words in the two languages. We see this because the verses in the Old Testament that mention sheol, when they are quoted in the New Testament, they're quoted as hades.

And because in the Septuagint, which was the Greek translation of the Old Testament, sheol is translated as hades. Hades, like sheol, is not the place where the lost go for all eternity. Hades is where the rich man was immediately after he died in the story of Lazarus and the rich man.

Lazarus was in Abram's bosom. The rich man was in Hades, it says. In Hades he lifted up his eyes and saw Lazarus afar off.

Was this after the Day of Judgment? No, it was not. The man still had some living brothers who hadn't died yet. Five.

He said, my brothers up there, could someone go warn them about this place? This man was not on the other side of the Day of Judgment. The Day of Judgment is when Jesus comes back. This man's brothers hadn't even died yet.

This man, immediately after he died, found himself in Hades. And so, Hades is not the place of eternal torment, or the place of eternal disposition of the lost. Hades, like sheol, is the same thing, just where all the dead go.

In fact, it says in Revelation chapter 20, in verse 14, I believe it is, it says, death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. Now, if there's any image in the book of Revelation that corresponds with our traditional view of hell, it's the lake of fire. That's where the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, and they have no rest day or night.

That's where the beast and the false prophet are said to be tormented day and night, forever and ever. If there's a place of eternal torment mentioned in Revelation, it's the lake of fire. But in Revelation 20, in verse 14, death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire.

So, Hades is clearly not the lake of fire. Hades is clearly differentiated from what we normally think of as hell. Therefore, it's confusing and a bit misleading for translators to translate either sheol or Hades as hell.

And yet, all of the references to hell in the Old Testament are sheol, and most of the references to hell in the New Testament are Hades. And it's clear that if by hell we're thinking of the place of eternal judgment, hell is not a good translation for those words. That is a mistranslation.

And you know, most of the Hebrew and Greek scholars now know this. And in the modern translations, and this is not a compromise on this part, this is just reflecting what scholarship now knows, most modern translations leave sheol and Hades untranslated. Even the New King James, which I use mostly, instead of translating Hades as hell, it just calls it Hades.

It just doesn't translate it. And the reason for that is because it's somewhat untranslatable. It just refers to whatever the state is of dead people.

They are in sheol in Hebrew or Hades in the Greek. So, right away, the majority of passages that mention hell in the Bible aren't really talking about what we call hell at all. They're talking about something else.

That leaves two other Greek words in the New Testament that are translated hell. One of them is Tartarus. This word is found only in one place, 2 Peter 2.4. And it clearly is not a reference to what we call hell.

Now, in the King James Version, it says, The angels that sinned he has cast into hell. But he describes them there as being in chains under darkness, awaiting the judgment of the great day. Now, the word that is used for hell there is Tartarus.

Only once is it used in the Bible, only there. And it's translated hell in the King James. But clearly it's not talking about the place where sinners go after the judgment day.

This is where angels that fell are now, waiting for the judgment day. Again, as Hades might be described as the interim place of the dead before the judgment day, Tartarus is the interim place of the fallen angels until the judgment day. It's apparently not the same thing as Hades.

It's probably what Revelation calls the abyss or the bottomless pit. But whether it is or not, it's clear that Tartarus and Hades and Sheol are not references to what we call hell in modern English. That leaves only one word in the Greek that could really reasonably be translated as hell, and if we by hell mean what we traditionally mean by that.

And that is the word Gehenna. Gehenna. G-E-H-E-N-N-A.

Now, this word was used only by Jesus in his teaching, and James used it one time. But James' usage doesn't help us much. James 3, 6 says that the tongue is a fire, and it's a world of iniquity, and it sets on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of Gehenna.

King James says it is set on fire of hell. So the tongue is set on fire of hell. Obviously, that's figuratively speaking because the fire of hell isn't really burning on your tongue.

It's obviously a poetic statement. So the use of Gehenna by James is not helpful in deciding what Gehenna is necessarily, and James 3, 6 is the only place outside the teaching of Jesus that Gehenna is used. So what we've come to is of all the words that could possibly be translated as hell, only Gehenna remains and only Jesus uses it.

Now, I'm not saying that hell is not... the concept is not mentioned elsewhere. Paul talks about those who will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. Revelation talks about people being thrown in the lake of fire.

The word hell is not used, but certainly the concept of what we usually think of as hell seems to be equated with this lake of fire or this everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. What I'm saying is the word itself, hell, only has one word in the Greek that could possibly be translated with this English word, and it's restricted to the teaching of Jesus. And Jesus only uses it, I think, about six times, though it appears more times than that because of the parallels in the Gospels where the same saint of Jesus is given in more than one Gospel.

But I'll talk more about Gehenna in a little bit, but I should clarify that the word Gehenna, the literal meaning of Gehenna is Valley of Hinnom. Gehenna is Greek for what the Hebrews called the Valley of Hinnom or the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom. Hinnom was a person's name.

And the sons of Hinnom had a piece of real estate that was a valley to the southwest of Jerusalem. This valley, in the days of Manasseh, the worst king that Judah ever had, became the location where Molech was worshipped. And Manasseh and the Israelites under him actually burned their infants alive in the arms of this statue, Molech, a demon god.

He was the god of the Canaanites. And God had said to Joshua, you have to wipe out all the Canaanites. If you don't, your people will learn their ways and you'll worship their gods.

They don't have to judge you. Well, that's what happened. They didn't kill the Canaanites off.

They borrowed their gods. By the time of Manasseh, worship of Molech was institutionalized in Judah. And when Josiah later came along and brought reforms, of course very disgusted with this worship of Molech, he defiled the Valley of Hinnom where Molech had been worshipped.

He made it, in fact, into a garbage dump. It became a garbage dump for the people of Jerusalem and a place where criminals' bodies were thrown who were not dignified with

a decent burial. The fires of the Valley of Hinnom were kept burning perpetually, day and night.

It was also a place where there was much sulfur. Now, I'm of different, I've heard different things. I think the sulfur was not indigenous to the valley.

I think that they added sulfur for disinfectant purposes. But the place reeked of sulfur which is what the Bible calls brimstone. The images of the Lake of Fire burning with fire and brimstone in Revelation evoke images of the Valley of Hinnom, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem which smelled of sulfur, that's brimstone, and had perpetual unquenchable fires burning all the time.

Now, there's a number of times when Jesus talked about the danger of wicked people being thrown into Gehenna. Traditionally, our English Bibles translate this as hell, though literally Gehenna simply means the Valley of Hinnom. I've known this for many years and even when my belief in the traditional view of hell was not even challenged and I was 100% sure it was right, I was aware from reading commentaries that Gehenna meant the Valley of Hinnom.

I knew about this history of the Valley of Hinnom and so forth. But the commentary said because of the perpetually burning fires of the Valley of Hinnom, Jesus used the Valley of Hinnom as an image to represent hell. So, that's why Gehenna is translated as hell.

Now, only in recent years have I began to say, how do we know this? When Jesus said the Valley of Hinnom, how do we know He didn't just mean the Valley of Hinnom? How do we know He meant hell? When in fact His listeners, hearing the word Gehenna, it's not like a strange word they'd have said, I wonder what He means by that? Gehenna was a common word. It referred to that place southwest of Jerusalem where all the garbage was being burned. And when Jesus said, it's better to have your eye plucked out of your hand cast, cut off than to be thrown into Gehenna, there's not any reason why His original listeners would necessarily have thought He was talking about something after the Day of Judgment, some hell.

Maybe He was, and maybe He wasn't. That has to be determined by what He actually said on the subject. And we'll look at everything He said on that subject tonight.

But let me give you the reasons that the traditional view has been supported and then I'll probably take a break and we'll come back and see what support there is for the alternative views. The traditional view is of course the view of eternal torment. Here's the arguments that are in support of it.

The first is that man is by nature immortal. This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. When God made animals, He didn't make them immortal.

But when He made man, unlike the animals, He made them in the image of God. And

intrinsic immortality is part of the image of God that is in man. I'm not asserting this to be true right now.

I'm saying that this is a foundational argument for the traditional view. The assumption with which I was raised, that man is intrinsically immortal, led to the obvious conclusion that those who don't spend eternity with God must spend eternity consciously somewhere else, away from God. And I was aware that there are many passages that speak of the lost being away from God, in outer darkness.

Or Jesus said, I will say to them, depart from me, you workers of iniquity, I never knew you. Or they will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. In 2 Thessalonians 1.9. These expressions always informed my view of hell from my youth.

That what makes hell, hell, is the absence of God. Now, some sinners might say, well, what's so bad about the absence of God? I've lived my whole life absent from God. And I'm kind of enjoying myself, frankly.

And I'd just soon be in hell with all my friends, as being in hell with all these hypocrites I don't even like. How many sinners say that? I'd rather be a ruler in hell than a servant in heaven. Well, then they probably will be in hell.

Whether they get to be rulers or not, it's not going to be a decision they get to make. But the whole issue here is, I believe that they are underestimating because they cannot possibly conceive of what existence would be totally sans God, absent God. You see, there has never been a person who lived on the face of the earth who has lived his life wholly apart from the grace of God.

Jesus said, God causes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good. He causes the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. He is merciful, Jesus said in Luke chapter 6, to the ungrateful and the unholy.

There has not been a human being who has not received something of the mercy of God. All light, all life, all enjoyment is part of the good things of God. James says, don't be deceived.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning. That every good thing a person has, whether it's the love of a spouse, the love of a child, or the love of a parent, or the love of friendship, whether it's the enjoyment of a good meal, whether it's the good feelings one has when they see the sunlight coming through their window in the morning, whether it's the enjoyment of a beautiful landscape, every good gift is from God. And if a person was absent 100% from all things God, that's what would be outer darkness.

There'd be nothing to enjoy. Then there'd be no way of enjoying anything because all that is enjoyable is part of what God gives by common grace to all people. An eternity apart from God would be something that no one has yet been able to imagine, but it would be absent all joy, absent all pleasure, absent all friendship, absent all love.

It has never mattered to me too much whether hell was literally fire or whether fire was simply an image of the most horrendous imaginable, torment. I knew, after I read the prophets especially, that fire is a common image of judgment. Whether used literally or not in Scripture, it is an image of God's wrath and God's judgment.

Therefore, eternal fire or the fire of hell, as far as I was concerned, might be literal or might not. It doesn't matter. The important thing about hell is that God isn't there and that anyone who goes there will have an agony heretofore unimaginable to them.

Now, that much I accepted. If man is intrinsically immortal and must therefore be consciously alive somewhere for all eternity because they're immortal, then only some are going to be with God. Those who are in Christ will be for eternity with God.

The others will be eternally absent from God. Then, of course, what can there be but eternal torment? Also, as I mentioned earlier, much as we might think differently, sin is a crime against infinite majesty, against an eternal God, and is therefore of infinite magnitude and the just punishment is rightfully eternal. This is at least how I argued and how it is argued for the traditional view.

Also, and I hear this all the time, I just heard it on the radio today from another preacher. I hear it all the time. No one taught as much about hell as Jesus.

This is an important point, I guess, in supporting the traditional view against sentimental objections. How could a God of love do this? Well, Jesus certainly knew about the God of love. If we ever learned anything about the God of love, it was from Jesus.

And yet, he taught about hell more than anybody. I might add, he's the only one who taught about hell. Because Paul didn't, Peter didn't, James didn't, John didn't, except maybe in Revelation.

The Old Testament didn't. We only find teaching about hell, if Gehenna is indeed hell, in the teaching of Jesus. So, the idea is, how can anyone say that the doctrine of hell is somehow at odds with the idea that God is a merciful, compassionate Father when Jesus, who is our source of that vision of God as a merciful, compassionate Father, is the one who told us about hell also? It must not be contradictory.

So it is argued. Then, of course, there's just a variety of statements of Scripture that sound like they teach eternal torment. The Scriptures speak of the judgment of unbelievers, of everlasting fire, in Matthew 25, verse 41.

Of the fire that is not quenched, in Mark 9, verses 43 through 48. Of everlasting punishment, in Matthew 25, verse 46. And of the smoke of their torment ascending forever and ever, in Revelation 14, verse 11.

Certainly, that language gives some strength to the imagery that hell is a place of eternal punishment and torment. Now, I'm going to run through, real quickly, all the Scriptural evidence on the traditional view of hell. I'm going to tell you, in a nutshell, what each of these verses says.

The most you can hope to do in the time allotted is to jot down the references and look them up later. It might even be hard to do that, because I'm going to have to go through this rather rapidly. But you may want to jot down the references.

I doubt that you can do much more at the speed I'm going to have to go through this. I'm going to talk about everything in the Bible about hell. Every reference.

First of all, I want to talk about all the references to Gehenna. As I said, Gehenna is the only Greek word that, credibly, could be translated as hell. And to mean what we normally understand hell to mean.

These are all in the teaching of Jesus. Most of them are in Matthew. In Matthew 5.22, Jesus said, If a man says to his brother, Raka, he'll be in danger of the judgment.

If he says, you fool, he'll be in danger of Gehenna. So Gehenna is where people go who say, you fool, to your brother. That doesn't tell us much about Gehenna, but it tells us it's the place where people go who do things very offensive to God.

That's Matthew 5.22. In Matthew 5.29 and Matthew 5.30, Jesus refers to the whole body being cast into Gehenna being a worse fate than mutilation. Better to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand or cut off your foot. Better to do that than have your whole body cast into Gehenna.

An interesting statement because it suggests Gehenna is where a body is thrown. He says to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. It's not just a place of spirits.

It's a place of bodies. On the traditional view, one could argue that's why the unbeliever will be resurrected as well as the believer. The believer will be resurrected to live in a new earth with Christ.

The unbeliever will be resurrected so that his body can be thrown into Gehenna. And in another passage, Matthew 10.28, Jesus said, Don't fear him who can kill your body and do no more, but fear him who can destroy the body and the soul in Gehenna. Once again, the body is thrown in and destroyed in Gehenna along with the soul in Matthew 10.28. In Matthew 23.33, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and he says, How shall you escape the damnation of Gehenna? Now, damnation, of course, is a word traditionally

associated with hell.

It literally means condemnation. And so, damnation means condemnation. How will you escape the condemnation of Gehenna? And then finally, in Mark 9.43, 45, and 47.

Three times the same statement is made. It again has to do with plucking out the eye and cutting off the hand. But he says, better to do that than to be thrown into Gehenna where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

Now, that's all there is. That's all there is in the Bible about Gehenna. Now, notice most of those statements don't tell us very much about it.

If you say you fool, you'll go to Gehenna. But it doesn't tell you much what happens there. We're told that your body can be cast into Gehenna.

Nothing is said about what happens after that. Your body and your soul can be destroyed in Gehenna, according to Jesus. The Pharisees will not escape the condemnation of Gehenna.

Now, all of these things are saying that Gehenna is where the bad people are going to go, but it doesn't tell us anything about what happens to them after that, except the one that says their body and their soul is destroyed in Gehenna. Now, the passages in Mark do speak of Gehenna being a place where the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die. And the idea that the fire is not quenched certainly gives the image of eternal fire.

And if eternal fire, then presumably eternal torment. If the soul is immortal and is in these eternal fires, of course, that suggests eternal torment. And it also seems to be backed up by the lake of fire references in Revelation, where it speaks of torment being day and night, forever and ever.

Now, we'll say more about this later, but I just want you to know that's the whole of biblical data on the subject of Gehenna. And Gehenna is the only word in the Greek that could credibly be translated hell. But we also have to ask, could it be translated Gehenna? Could all these references be referring to the valley of Hinnom? Well, in the context they're given, that may be a possibility to consider, but we'll have to wait until later to consider that.

Let's go on further. In the Gospels, there's additional information that we might associate with the doctrine of hell, even though the word Gehenna or hell is not used. Just other words are used, but the same concept, perhaps.

John the Baptist said in Matthew 3.12 that the Christ's fan was in his hand, and he's about to gather his grain into his granary, and he's going to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. In Matthew 7.23, Jesus said, Many will say to me in that day, Lord,

Lord, I'll say I never knew you, depart from me. He doesn't say what they depart into, but they depart from him.

So, they obviously depart somewhere absent from him. In Matthew 8.12 and Matthew 22.13 and Matthew 25.30, all of these places speak of the lost going into outer darkness, where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. Now, there's nothing said about this being eternal weeping or eternal gnashing of teeth, but if the soul is immortal, as is traditionally assumed, then presumably the weeping and the gnashing of teeth may be eternal.

In Matthew 13, there are two parables about the judgment. One is the wheat and the tares, and one is the good fish and the bad fish and the dragnet. In both cases, it says the tares and the bad fish are thrown into a furnace of fire with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now, we read that in the outer darkness there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. Now, we read there's a furnace of fire where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. Once again, we're not told whether this is eternal or temporary or what, but it is a place of torment, certainly.

In Matthew 25, verse 41, we have in the midst of the story of the sheep and the goats that the goats are sent off into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Matthew 25, verse 41. Everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

And in the same parable at the end, in Matthew 25, verse 46, it says these should go into everlasting punishment. Now, we've got everlasting fire and we've got everlasting punishment. This verse, probably more than most, evokes the idea of eternal torment and everlasting punishment.

And then in Mark 3, 29, Jesus referred to those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit as having an eternal damnation, eternal condemnation to those who commit that sin. Now, when you move out of the Gospels into the epistles, what we have are the following. Romans 2, verses 8 and 9 speak of those who are lost as experiencing, apparently after judgment day, indignation, wrath, tribulation and anguish.

Hell is not mentioned, nor the duration of these unpleasant things. But what they experience are indignation, wrath, tribulation and anguish. That's in Romans 2, verses 8 and 9. In 2 Corinthians 5, 10, Paul says that when we go to the day of judgment, we'll all receive the things done in the body, whether good or bad.

So, some people are going to receive bad. He doesn't say what that is. It's just not going to be good.

In 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5, in verse 3, it says that those who are not prepared when Jesus returns will experience sudden destruction. In 2 Thessalonians 1, 9, as I mentioned

earlier, it speaks of them experiencing everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. Hebrews 6, 1 and 2 mentions as one of the foundational teachings of Christianity a doctrine he calls eternal judgment.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and of eternal judgment. Whatever that means. In Hebrews 10, 27, it says that those who continue sinning willfully after having known the truth can look forward to, he says, fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

In 2 Peter 2, 12, it's talking about false teachers in the church. It says that they will utterly perish in their corruption. And of the same people, it says in 2 Peter 2, 17, for whom the gloom of darkness is reserved forever.

And finally, Jude, verse 7, talks about Sodom and Gomorrah. It says that they suffer the vengeance of eternal fire. Now, I wish you had these all in print in front of you as I do.

So, you could sort of see the totality of the evidence at a glance. If you did, you'd see there's not much there that talks about eternal anything. Now, it may be implied.

A few places talk about everlasting fire, everlasting punishment, fire that is not quenched, everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord. Most of the statements don't mention whether it's eternal or not. Just talk about anguish, distress, sudden destruction, utterly perishing, experiencing the gloom of darkness forever.

A lot of these, in other words, don't really provide specific support for a traditional doctrine of hell, though they might fit the doctrine. If the doctrine is easily established from other passages, these would simply, you know, supplement it. We'd have to read into them the eternal element that isn't mentioned, which is a valid thing to do if we have a clear teaching of it elsewhere.

Now, all that remains is the evidence in Revelation. Then we're going to take our break. And in Revelation, we read, as I said, of the lake of fire.

This is mentioned several times. Revelation 14.10, Revelation 19.20, and Revelation 21.8 all refer to the lake of fire as a lake that burns with fire and brimstone. Evokes images of Gehenna or the Valley of Hinnom.

In Revelation 14.11, as I've mentioned before, Revelation 14.11 says, in the lake of fire, the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, and they have no rest, day nor night. That's a very strong-sounding statement. I have always considered it to be one of the strongest statements in favor of eternal torment in the Bible.

Revelation 20.10 mentions that the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire where they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Once again, the lake of fire appears to be a place of torment forever and ever, at least for the beast and the

false prophet, if not for everybody. And that is all the data there is in the Bible on hell.

Considerably less than I would have thought before I called it all and checked it out. But still, some. There are still some formidable statements there that would be hard to overthrow the traditional doctrine in the face of.

Hard though it may be, there are arguments that are brought against that conclusion. And after we take a break, I'm going to show you what many people believe the Scripture teaches alternative to that traditional view.