

Rethinking Hell:
A (BRIEF!) Theological and Scriptural look at Universalism; Heaven, Hell & Purgatory

1. How clear is the Bible on Salvation, Heaven and Hell?

A. Who is saved?

- i. **Those who believe?** - *John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*
- ii. **Those who endure?** - *Matt 24:13 "but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."*
- iii. **Those who do good?** - *Matt 25:34-36 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'"*

B. Who is condemned?

- i. **Those who do not believe?** - *John 3:18 "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*
- ii. **Those who do evil?** - *Gal 5:19-21 "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."*
- iii. **Those who neglect to do good?** - *Matt 25:41-43 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'"*

C. Do the saved go to heaven immediately or sleep until the Resurrection?

- i. *Luke 23:43 "And Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'"*
- ii. *Daniel 12:2 "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt."*

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2. What is Salvation & Heaven?

A. Salvation:

- i. Hebrew יְשָׁע (yesha) = liberation from slavery & rescue from enemy**
 - a. Under this concept should we suppose we are saved from God's anger, or rather we are liberated from the slavery of sin and rescued from the Enemy of our souls (is God our enemy?)
- ii. Greek σώζω (sózó) = healing from sickness and death**
 - a. Likewise does this look to rescue from wrath or rather removal of sin and its curse, Death?
 - b. The Eastern Orthodox Church's view on salvation has always been based on this Areek understanding and sees salvation as healing from the illness of sin and it's final outcome of death, therefore Jesus did not come to make a "legal atonement" through Penal Substitution for our sins as Protestantism has taught, but rather came to destroy sin and death on the cross, in order to heal and restore us to our intended state of union with God.

B. Heaven: metaphor for being united with God

- i. Fully in His presence** - *2 Cor 5:8 "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."*
- ii. Heavenly City/New Jerusalem** - *Rev 21:22-23 "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."*

C. Life

- i. Abundant** - *John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."*
- ii. Resurrection** - *1 Cor 15:52 "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."*

D. Bliss

- i. Paradise, Abraham's Bosom, Wedding Banquet** (Luke 23:43, Luke 16:22, Rev 19:7-9)

3. Hell and some misconceptions!

A. The word "Hell" is not in the Bible, rather it is a Germanic word used to describe several different biblical concepts:

I. Tartarus -

- a. Gr. Place where the Titans (Greek deities who preceded Olympians) were chained after war with Zeus and Olympians. 2 Peter 2:4 (only reference) uses it as a comparative reference for God binding sinful Angels, and therefore His intention to judge humans who sin.**

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II. Outer Darkness -

- a. Literally just “darkness” or “obscurity” (the word “outer” is not in the Gr. but has been added to enforce an interpretational bias) - none of the passage necessitate a position of *final* judgement, but may in fact be interpreted as being set into obscurity in this age (eg. Israel during “age of Gentiles”)

III. Sheol (Hebrew) & Hades (Greek)

- a. The realm of the dead, both wicked and good
- b. This is the usage when it speaks of Jesus descending to “hell” to lead captives free.

IV. Gehenna

- a. Literally: “Valley of Hinnom”, a real geographic location outside Jerusalem. Jesus is referring to a well known prophecy from Jeremiah 7:31-33 “They have built the high places of Topheth in the *Valley of Ben Hinnom* to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the *Valley of Ben Hinnom*, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away.” - this was a judgement of destruction.
- b. There is a fanciful myth that the Valley of Hinnom was the rubbish dump for the city of Jerusalem. There is no archeological or textual evidence of this prior to a single speculative reference in an obscure Jewish commentary dated from the 12th century CE.

V. Torment in a Lake of Fire (& Brimstone) -

- a. The Fire of God in scripture has two connotations.
 1. Consuming (usually in terms of sacrifice)
 2. Purifying (in terms of judgement and the burning up of that which is evil)
- b. Linguistically the image of **fire**, especially when used with **brimstone** (sulphur) would *always* reference purification. The two used in connection were well known tools for the purification of metals (gold). The gold was melted in a crucible (lake?) in the fire, and sulphur (brimstone) was added to draw the impurities to the top. This method is still used by metallurgist today.
- c. Linguistically the word translated “torment” is also a common metallurgic word that literally means “touchstone”. A touchstone was a stone that metallurgists would scrape against metal to test the purity of the metal. It would leave a mark depending on the purity. For this reason, except where theological bias on the nature of hell forces the translator to use “torment” this word is translated more correctly as “tested”.

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4. Three main views of judgement/hell (and a fourth that looks like a subset of Universalism)

A. "Harsh" or Strong Judgement

I. Eternal Conscious Torment (ECT)

- a. This is by far the most common view and has been the traditional view of most Protestants and Roman Catholics since it was solidified by Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century. This view looks primarily at language of torment (never mind the linguistic issues mentioned above) and weeping/gnashing of teeth, combined with the language of "eternity" (also perhaps poorly translated) to come to the conclusion that God will condemn some (perhaps the majority of humanity) to suffer unrelenting torment for all of eternity simply for failing to believe in Jesus.
- b. **Purgatory** - I've included this here as Roman Catholics primarily believe in Eternal Conscious Torment, but ALSO have a limited time of "torment" for those who do believe but have had various degrees of sin in their life
- c. A further problem with language: All the references to the "eternal" nature of this torment are based on the Greek word αἰώνιος (aiónios - from which we get the word aeons, ie "an age, a long measure of time"). This word may be better translated "Of the Age" (in reference to the Age to come) or "for an age" ie a duration of time. There is another word in Greek that means specifically "eternal" or "without end" (διηνεκής - diénekés). The difficulty with this is that "eternal life" also uses this word (αἰώνιος). However if one looks at the promise of reward from a 1st century Jewish perspective, they were more concerned with the "Messianic Age to come" than they were about what happens after death. If this is true then Jesus words about a reward of "Life in the Age to come" makes perfect sense (and the eternal duration of the reward is addressed in other verses such as Luke 20:35-36, "*But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the **age to come** and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they **can no longer die**; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.*" (in fact Jesus here specifically addresses the concept of both "the age to come" and the eternal nature of the reward through stating that "they can no longer die").

ii. Annihilationism/Conditional Immortality

- a. Of the two stronger (or harsher?) views of judgement, Annihilationism, or more positively referred to as Conditional Immortality due to the logical conclusion that Eternal Life is the reward of the believer in contrast to death, (since ECT can also be viewed as eternal life...but spent in torment) is less popular, but carries, in my opinion the stronger Biblical evidence. There are far more passages that deal with judgement in terms of destruction or final (second) death than there are for ECT. I've listed some of that language and references below:

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1. Destruction” or “perish” (Greek: apoleia or olethros Matt 7:13; John 3:16; 17:12; Acts 8:20; Rom 9:22-23; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess 2:3; 1 Tim 6:9; Heb 10:39; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 Thess 5:3; 2 Thess 1:9; 1 Tim 6:9).
2. “Death” (Greek: thanatos or apothnesko Rom 1:32; 6:21; 7:5; 8:6; 1 Cor 15:21-22; 15:56; 2 Cor 2:16; 7:10; James 1:15; 5:20; 1 John 5:16; Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8)
3. burned up chaff, trees, weeds, branches (Matt 3:12; 7:19; 13:40; John 15:6).

B. “Light” or Easy Judgement

i. Universalism

- a. Universalism has become a very popular view on judgement lately, primarily as the church has moved away from preaching a Gospel based on fear of hell and the wrath of an “Angry God”, and begun to preach what I believe is the *true* Gospel of the reconciling love of God. Universalism asks the question, “how can a living God condemn anyone to an eternity being tormented in Hell simply for not believing the right things?” It takes a logical and critical look at the professed unconditional love of God. The view has been made even more popular in recent years through Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins* (see resource section below).
- b. Many universalists have been rightly critiqued in their reliance upon emotionalism over genuine theological study and evidence (though this does not necessarily mean they are wrong, and there are some outstanding theologians doing work on this subject, some of whom I have listed in the resource section).
- c. Universalism has also been critiqued on why evangelism would be necessary if everyone will be saved anyway. There may be a perfectly good answer, depending on the person’s understanding of salvation and judgement, and I’ll touch on that briefly below.
- d. Likewise the question of any consequences for sin arises if God will just save everyone, including the Hitlers and Stalins and Maos of the world.

C. A Just and Loving Judgement?

i. Universal Restoration (Greek: Apocatastasis) - a subset of Universalism (or the better defence of it?)

- a. Apocatastasis is a Greek word that means restoration, or reconstitution, and carries the inference that God will at the end of ages bring all things (including all people) back into their intended order and place in creation, ie into full unity with Him. The word comes from Acts 3:20-21 “*that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of **restoration** of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.*”

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- b. Many of the Early Church Fathers and theologians held this view including Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen, Didymus, Evagrius, Maximus the Confessor, and even Augustine of Hippo (though he changed his view later in life and became the strongest advocate for ECT). The Eastern Orthodox church holds it as a valid possibility (though some still hold to ECT).
- c. Advocates for Apocatastasis (including the listed Church Fathers, as well as modern and esteemed theologians such as David Bentley Hart, Brad Jersak, Robin Parry) don't dismiss the judgment of God on the wicked, but see those judgments (and the passages that refer to them) in terms of purification (see linguistic look at "fire", "brimstone" & "torment" above). Therefore in this view the Catholic understanding of Purgatory is not far off, though all people (not just believers) will be purified and tested in the presence of God. This is born out in passages such as:
1. *Rom 2:5-11 "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. **God "will repay each person according to what they have done."** To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favouritism."*
 2. *2 Cor 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may **receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.**"*
 3. *Matt 16:27 "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will **reward each person according to what they have done.**"*
 4. *Rev 20:12 "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. **The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.**"*
 5. The most explicit description of a "Purgatory" or purifying fire for "the saved" is found in 1 Cor 3:12-15: *"If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, **their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved— even though only as one escaping through the flames.**"*

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- d. Some passages that point to ALL people eventually being saved (restored)
1. 1 Corinthians 15:22 "For as in Adam all die, so also **in Christ shall all be made alive.**"
 2. 2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, **not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.**"
 3. 1 Timothy 2:3–6 "This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who **wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.** For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as **a ransom for all men**—the testimony given in its proper time."
 4. 1 John 2:2 "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and **not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.**"
 5. 1 Timothy 4:10 "For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the **Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.**"
 6. Romans 11:32 "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so **that he may have mercy on them all.**"
 7. Romans 5:14-18 "Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come. But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! **Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.**
 8. 1 Cor 15:22-26 "For as in Adam all die, so **in Christ all will be made alive.** But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.**"

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9. *Rev 21:22-25 "But I saw no temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, because the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its lamp. By its light the nations will walk, and into it the kings of the earth will bring their glory. **Its gates will never be shut** at the end of the day, because there will be no night there."*

5. **A note on Justice of God** - Opponents of "standard" Universalism are rightly concerned that the justice of God is set aside for emotional reasons. However those same opponents are equally quick to toss away His justice in the other direction by allowing for God to punish people with a penalty that far outweighs the nature of their crimes. We are quick in earthly situations to point out when a penalty seems unjust for a crime (the cutting off of a hand for simple theft, or life in prison for a third minor drug possession conviction in America's notorious "Three Strikes Law"). I would ask such opponents whether Eternal Conscious Torment in Hell is a fair penalty for the simple crime of not believing in a Person they have never met (and especially when we must admit that the Church often poorly represents, and at times outright *misrepresents*, who He really is. Should a person stand before God and hear Him say, "I condemn you to hell since you refused to believe in me!", that person could rightly defend themselves by saying "that is not true. I refused to believe in the God that your people *represented* you to be. Had I met *you* personally I would have leapt into your arms with joy!" Because of this it seems to me that a truly just God would give every person a chance to choose Him after meeting Him face to face (rather than on the shaky doctrinal statements of His followers). Contrary to popular theological opinion there is no scriptural evidence for the lack of opportunity to choose God after death. The one passage cited is Her 9:7 "Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." This passage may preclude reincarnation, but it does not address timing of one's decision to embrace Christ, so does preclude that opportunity between the moment of death and the final judgement.

6. **Conclusion** - Based on a full study of Scripture, including language and context, it seems that the strongest arguments lie in favour of either Conditional Immortality or Universal Restoration (apocatastasis). Integrity prevents me from stating that the Scriptures are clearly in favour of one or the other, however when incorporating a reasoned look at both the loving and the just nature of God I might be inclined to lean towards Universal Restoration (perhaps allowing for genuine free will, a person could *choose* annihilation, but after meeting such a wonderful God face to face, why would they?)

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Resources

Heaven, Resurrection:

Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church



[N. T. Wright, HarperOne, 5 May 2009](#)

Universalism/Apocatastasis:

Love Wins: At the Heart of Life's Big Questions



[Rob Bell, HarperCollins UK, 17 Mar 2011](#)

Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem



[Bradley Jersak, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1 Jan 2010](#)

The Evangelical Universalist



[Gregory MacDonald, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 11 May 2012](#)

A Larger Hope?, Volume 1: Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich

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Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 15 Jul 2019

A Larger Hope?, Volume 2: Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century



Robin A. Parry, Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 15 Mar 2019

That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation



David Bentley Hart, Yale University Press, 24 Sep 2019

Conditional Immortality/Annihilationism:

Rethinking Hell: Readings in Evangelical Conditionalism



Christopher M. Date, Gregory G. Stump, Joshua W. Anderson, The Lutterworth Press, 30 Oct 2014

The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment



Edward Fudge, iUniverse, 2000