

What the Bible Says about the Duration of Eternal Punishment

In addition to denying the literal nature of Hell's fire, some modern theologians resort to limiting the extent of the punishment the damned will receive in Hell. They teach that the wicked will be completely consumed in Hell's fires—essentially being annihilated out of existence. The Bible, however, provides no such deliverance for those confined in the fiery realms of the damned.

- I. Annihilationism
 - A. Simply stated, those who believe in annihilation believe that the resurrected bodies of the lost will be cast into the literal fires of Gehenna (the Lake of Fire) and will be consumed in the flames. From that point on, the body and soul of the lost person will cease to exist.
 - B. While the concept of annihilation may appeal to man's mercy, it is not taught in the Bible. In addition the concept is illogical: if the resurrected bodies of the lost were consumed, how can we be sure their souls would be as well. Remember, the souls in Hades were not consumed in the fire.
 - C. God can preserve physical elements exposed to continuous burning:
 1. Moses saw a bush burning, but the bush was not consumed (Ex. 3:3). Literal fire burned the bush without consuming it.
 2. In Daniel 3 we read of the three Hebrew children being cast into the fiery furnace. Verse 27 assures us that the fire had no power on them and that they were not consumed. Clearly, a physical body can endure a physical fire should God make it so.
 3. God can sustain a material body in literal fire for as long as He sees fit to do so. Lost people will suffer such torment for all of eternity. Like the three Hebrew children, they will not be consumed. Unlike them, the lost will suffer the torment of the flame.
- II. The Conscious Torment of Hell
 - A. Hell (Hades) is described as a place of fiery torment (Luke 16:23). The word "torment" refers to tortures, grievous pains, and acute agonies.
 - B. Many modern religious teachers shrink from describing Hell in such terms out of a distorted sense of discretion. However, it is the height of indiscretion to refrain from the Biblical picture of Hell. People need to be made to feel uncomfortable at the thought of Hell.
 1. Genuine love for people is willing to risk their comfort in order to tell them the truth.
 2. You can never truly help people by hiding the truth from them.
 - C. The conscious torment of Hell involves weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth (Mt. 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28).

- D. Note: The above references are the words of Jesus. He loves people enough to tell them the truth. We must not mince words when describing a sinner's Hell.
- III. The Eternal Duration of Hell
- A. A Place of Everlasting Fire
1. Matthew 18:8—"If they hand or they foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life hal or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire."
 2. The fire is described as "everlasting," meaning that the suffering is everlasting as well. There would be no threat in a fire that immediately consumed the body and soul and then continued to burn forever.
 3. Jesus is candidly stating that self-amputation is to be preferred to spending an eternity in Hell. Nothing is worth the awful cost of the eternal suffering of the damned. (For an account of the grisly nature of self-amputation, read *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, a book detailing the account of a hiker who was forced into self-amputation to save his life.)
- B. A Place of Everlasting Punishment
1. Matthew 25:46 states that some will go into a place of "everlasting punishment." For the punishment to be everlasting, the object being punished must endure the punishment.
 2. Revelation 14:10-11 settle the question once and for all. Those who are confined to the fires of Gehenna have no rest "day or night"—their punishment is both conscious and eternal.
- C. A Place of Everlasting Contempt
1. Daniel 12:1, 2—the word "contempt" used in this passage is a Hebrew word that is used in only one other place in the Old Testament—Isaiah 66:24—"And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh." The word "abhorring" is the same word as "contempt" in Daniel 12.
 2. Jesus quoted this passage in reference to Hell in Mark 9:43-48. Therefore, the contempt of Hell is everlasting.

A final thought:

The concept of Hell as present in the Scripture should never be addressed with a vindictive or self-righteous tone. In speaking of the reality of Hell, one should do so with a tear in his eye. One should not delight to speak of Hell, but rather should warn the lost of its terrors with a tone of awe and deep sorrow. When warning of Hell, one should be quick to point the lost to their only hope—the finished work of Christ!