

# Eternal Hell

Rightly Dividing The Word: Shelf 5 — Volume 49

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Since all people are free-moral individuals with the ability and freedom to choose between good and evil, God knew that we must be in an environment that allows choices to be made. We must also be made aware of the consequences of our choices. We must know the reward for good choices. We must also be aware of the consequences of bad choices. If we make bad choices, we must know that eventually we will be held accountable for those choices and suffer the consequences.

**Accountability must be a part of our world view concerning choices that are made in our environment of choice making.** So here we are, in an environment where God allows us to make choices concerning His law. God has revealed the reward for good choices. Existence without end in a heavenly realm is the hope of the righteous (See Ti 1:2). For those who make right choices, God will reward them with a dwelling in the unending new heavens and new earth that are yet to come (See 2 Pt 3:13). This hope is an anchor of the soul (See Hb 6:18,19). It is our inspiration to be obedient to the will of God.

Therefore, in man's environment of choice-making, there must be a deterrent to making wrong choices. We must know that we will be held accountable for wrong behavior toward our fellow man. In the biblical world view, this deterrent is **gehenna**, the

second death or hell. Though we do not understand the totality of gehenna, there are enough clear statements in the New Testament to assure the disobedient that there is punishment waiting for those who make bad choices in reference to their fellow citizen of this world.

We live in an environment where there is divine law. God has delivered to humanity both a law of the conscience and a law that has been written by the direction of the Holy Spirit. Before and after the giving of the Sinai law to Israel, and before the establishment of the new covenant, the Gentiles lived under *“the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness”* (Rm 2:15). In other words, that which was lawful was that which was common sense for the betterment of humanity.

At Mount Sinai, the Jews were given the *“oracles of God”* that were written in stone (See Rm 3:1,2). When the Son of God came into this world, His disciples were blessed to receive the law of liberty (See Js 1:25; 2:8). All those who have obeyed the gospel since the cross have thus been under a law grace.

The point is that since all humanity has been under some law since the beginning, each person will eventually be held accountable for willful violation of the law under which they lived at any one time in history.

Where there is no law, there is no sin (See Rm 4:15; 5:13). But God has revealed His law (See Rm 2:11-16), and thus, those who violate law will suffer the punishment of God. There will be no excuse for those who end up in hell. All will stand before a just and fair God who will render to each according to his or her deeds in relation to the law of God (See 2 Co 5:10).

We must also consider that those who do not know the God who is revealed through the Bible, will also suffer the consequences of being separated from God. This was the meaning of the Holy Spirit in **2 Thessalonians 1:8**. Jesus will come *“in flaming*

***fire, taking vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.***” The meaning of “*those who do not know God*” must be understood in the context of those who do not obey the gospel in order to be made righteous before God.

It is the God of love who loved all humanity through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of their efforts to make themselves righteous before God, many have conceived of many gods that they have created after their own imagination. But the true God of heaven is a God of love who would give His only begotten Son for humanity in order to make those who are obedient to the gospel righteous before God (See Jn 3:16). It is for this God that honest and sincere people will look past their own performances of good works and law-keeping in order to be righteous before God (See Rm 1:20). It is this God who ***“made of one man all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth ... so that they should seek the Lord”*** (At 17:26,27). If one is not seeking to know this God, then he or she is not worthy to be in the eternal presence of this God.

The validation of the authority of God’s law rests in the fact of punishment for those who violate the law of God. Those who willfully reject the God of love have only ***“a certain fearful expectation of judgment and fiery indignation that will devour the adversaries”*** (Hb 10:26,27). The punishment of hell becomes the deterrent to rejecting a knowledge of the one true and living God of love. People must fear this God ***“who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”*** (Mt 10:28). Jesus exhorted, ***“But I will show you whom you should fear: fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!”*** (Lk 12:5; see Ps 119:120; Hb 10:26-31).

Soberness concerning judgment comes from a knowledge that we will give account of every idle word that we will speak (See Mt 12:36). We are thus motivated to do right in living in order to enter the narrow gate into life (See Mt 7:13,14). A healthy

understanding of hell is necessary, therefore, in order to deter us from disobedience of the God who offered His Son in an eternal sacrifice for sins. The knowledge of a coming hell is necessary in order that we direct our lives by the word of God, and away from sin against law.

## Chapter 1

### ■ The Definition Of Hell ■

The word “hell” is the English word that is used to translate the Greek word **gehenna**. Though the word “hell” was used to translate both **hades** and **gehenna** in the *King James Version*, these two words have two different meanings. They refer to two different existences. **Hades refers to the unseen existence of the disembodied**, whereas **gehenna refers to the final punishment that will be meted out to the embodied wicked at the last judgment**. Gehenna is used in the New Testament in the following passages:

#### GEHENNA

- ▶ **Matthew 5:22:** *“And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ will be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of **hell** [gehenna] fire.”*
- ▶ **Matthew 5:29,30:** *“... it is profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into **hell** [gehenna]” (See also Mk 9:43,45,47).*
- ▶ **Matthew 10:28:** *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in **hell** [gehenna].”*
- ▶ **Matthew 18:9:** *“And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into **hell** [gehenna] fire.”*
- ▶ **Matthew 23:15:** *“For you [Pharisees] travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of **hell** [gehenna] as yourselves.”*
- ▶ **Matthew 23:33:** *“Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of **hell** [gehenna]?”*
- ▶ **Mark 9:45:** *“And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into **hell** [gehenna] into the fire that shall never be quenched” (See vss 43,47).*
- ▶ **Luke 12:5:** *“Fear Him who, after He has killed, has*

*power to cast into **hell** [gehenna]; yes, I say to you, fear Him!”*

- ▶ **James 3:6:** *“The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by **hell** [gehenna].”*

The word “gehenna” is a Jewish word. It is used by Matthew, Mark and Luke in recording the words of Jesus when He referred to the punishment and end of the wicked. Except for the epistle of James (See Js 3:6), it is not used in the rest of the New Testament. Therefore, at least one conclusion can be made from the use of the word in the New Testament. It is a Jewish word, and **was used when inspired literature was written specifically to those who come from a Jewish culture.** The Jews knew the meaning of the word.

It is interesting to note that **the word gehenna is not used in secular Greek literature. It is not used in the Septuagint.** In the later part of the first century, the Jewish historian, Josephus, did not use the word in all his writings.

**One could conclude from the lack of the use of this word in Gentile literature that this was a word that was used only in Jewish theology. It is a word that the Jews used specifically in reference to the final destruction of the wicked.**

The English word “gehenna” is a transliteration of the Greek word. The word was used to translate the Hebrew word that referred to the “valley of Hinnom,” or “valley of the sons of Hinnom.” The circumstances surrounding the valley of Hinnom were the real and actual events of both Jesus and James’ metaphorical use of the word gehenna.

The valley of Hinnom was southwest of the city of Jerusalem. This area was called the “**valley of the son of Hinnom**” (*gehenna*) as early as the days of Joshua (See Ja 15:8; 18:16). During the days of Ahaz and Manasseh, apostate Israel offered their children as sacrifices to the god Moloch in this valley

(See 2 Kg 16:3: 21:6). The valley eventually was given the name “Toplevel,” or a “place of abhorrence,” or “to be spit upon.”

Some scholars believe that this valley was the location where the 185,000 dead bodies of the slain Assyrian army of Hezekiah’s day were burned (See Is 30:31-33; 37:36). If so, then the definition of the place was established, throughout Israel, as a metaphor for the consumption of the wicked. At least, when Jeremiah wrote he stated that because of Israel’s rejection of God, apostate Israelites would be burned in this valley just as they sacrificed their children there and also burned the bodies of the Assyrians (See Jr 7:31-33; 19:1-13).

Isaiah pictured a judgment to come that would be as a consuming fire. *“The Lord will come with fire,”* he wrote, *“to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire”* (Is 66:15). God will consume the bodies of the wicked in judgment as Isaiah revealed:

*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. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh* (Is 66:24; see Mk 9:44-48).

The Jews understood Isaiah’s message. By the time Jesus came, the Jewish thinking concerning the valley of Hinnom (gehenna) was firmly established. When Jesus used the word, therefore, those of His Jewish audience who heard understood that something would be consumed. As physical bodies were consumed throughout the history in the valley of Hinnom, **Jesus warned that they must fear another consumption that was yet to come.** Jesus proclaimed, *“And do not fear those who kill body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [gehenna]”* (Mt 10:28).

Jesus’ audience knew exactly what Jesus meant in this statement. Those who were thrown into gehenna would be destroyed. They would be consumed. This

was Paul's point in 2 Thessalonians 1:9. The wicked ***“shall be punished with everlasting destruction.”***

Gehenna (hell) is a destruction that will not be undone. It will be final, but the results of the destruction will also be final. It is a destruction that will take place after just punishment has been given to those who have sinned against God and brought hardship on the flock of God. All those who are not in a covenant relationship with God, therefore, **will suffer the consequences of destruction.**

When the word “gehenna” is used in the New Testament we must think of destruction. The purpose of the Valley of Hinnom (gehenna) was for destruction. The use of this word by the New Testament writers was to alert the readers that the Holy Spirit was speaking of a destruction to come.

## Chapter 2

### ■ The Description Of Hell ■

The New Testament is loaded with metaphors that describe hell. The reason the Holy Spirit used metaphors so extensively to describe hell is that nothing has ever existed that will give us a literal meaning of what hell will actually be. **It is an existence that has not yet happened, and therefore, must be explained to us through metaphors.**

Because metaphors are used to explain hell, we must be cautious about being dogmatic in this discussion. Every writer's words on this subject must be taken with a “grain of salt,” for no one can know exactly what it will be.

All we have to work with in any discussion of hell are the words of this world that the Holy Spirit used in revelation to take our minds to an existence far beyond the reality of this world.

Regardless of the debate concerning the duration of hell, it is pictured with the most graphic metaphors of this world that portray it as a horrible destiny. All who would study this subject should cringe at the

horribleness of this place as it is metaphorically described by the Holy Spirit. The following are some of the graphic pictures of the destiny of the wicked:

### GEHENNA

- ▶ A place of **punishment** (Mt 25:46; Hb 10:29).
- ▶ A place of **condemnation** (Mt 23:33; Jn 5:29).
- ▶ A place of **everlasting judgment** (Hb 6:2).
- ▶ A place of **eternal destruction** (Mt 7:13,14; 2 Th 1:9).
- ▶ A place of **fire and brimstone** (Mt 18:8; 25:41; Mk 9:48; Rv 19:20; 20:10,14,15; 21:8).
- ▶ A place of **outer darkness** (Mt 8:12; 25:30; Jd 13).
- ▶ A place of **pain and anguish** (Mt 8:12; 25:30).
- ▶ A place of **no rest** (Rv 14:11).

The Holy Spirit uses those terms that are most shocking in our understanding in order to describe the nature of hell. It is a place of “fire and brimstone.” “Fire and brimstone” are associated with that which is physical and of this world. Such is the most terrible experience our physical bodies could go through in this life. The metaphor, though of this world, would suggest something that is greater than this world. To say that “fire and brimstone” is metaphorical does not detract from the severity of hell’s environment. **It would suggest that a metaphorical understanding would explain hell to be a greater punishment than literal fire and brimstone.**

Hell is an environment of “outer darkness” (See Jd 13). God is light (See 1 Jn 1:5). Since the wicked will be vanquished from the presence of God (See 2 Th 1:9), **then they will be separated from the light of God’s glory.**

Whether the “darkness” refers to a spiritual environment of darkness or literal darkness is not important. The metaphorical fire will burn with darkness, thus indicating that the tormenting fire will not be as we experience in this world. Since this world will pass away (See 2 Pt 3:11), we must assume that the fire will be different than that which is of this world. Therefore, the darkness will be different than what we experience in this world. But in conjunction with this, **there will be no spiritual**



## light in this place of the condemned.

What the Holy Spirit is trying to do is to use those metaphors that are most graphic in order to paint the most horrible picture possible for the destiny of the wicked. The reason the Spirit has given such a graphic picture of the condemned is obvious. Everyone should be horrified with the possibility of being condemned to such an environment.

The Holy Spirit uses the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” on several occasions in reference to the punishment of the wicked. We would suggest that the emphasis of the phrase is in reference to extreme terror, or the realization of great loss, or both.

This meaning would better fit the contexts where the phrase is used. Consider the context of the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” as Jesus used the metaphor during His ministry: *“The sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Mt 8:12; see 22:13; 25:30). Those *“who practice lawlessness”* will be **cast out** where there is **weeping and gnashing of teeth** (See Mt 13:41,42). At the end of the Jewish state, Jesus said that the rebellious wicked who reject the gospel would be **cast into the furnace of fire**. There will be **wailing and gnashing of teeth** (See Mt 13:49,50). In His parable concerning the unmerciful servant, Jesus said that this servant would be appointed the destination of the hypocrites, where there is **weeping and gnashing of teeth** (See Mt 24:55).

The point is what Jesus said of the wicked, *“Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity”* (Mt 7:23). The wicked will thus have great regret concerning what they have lost. They are cast away from the blessings that come from obedience to the will of God. Therefore, *“there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out”* (Lk 13:27,28).

From the preceding context in which “weeping

and gnashing of teeth” is used, **emphasis is on the result of separation**. When the wicked are cast out, **they are separated from the presence of God**. When the wicked realize their separation from God, they will suffer great anguish. In their torment, they will realize what they have missed. With this understanding, therefore, we must conclude that at least at the beginning of their existence in hell, **the wicked will have some consciousness of the reality of their existence and what they have lost because of their rejection of faith in God**.

## Chapter 3

### ■ The Occupants Of Hell ■

John concluded, *“And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire”* (Rv 20:15). In a specific sense, therefore, all who have not come into a covenant relationship with God, will find their destiny in an existence that is separate from the presence of God. The Bible identifies those who are destined for hell:

#### A. Hell Is For Satan & His Angels

The words of Jesus in **Matthew 25:41** clearly indicate that hell is specifically prepared for those who were the first to rebel against the authority of God. *“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”* Hell has been prepared for the devil and his spiritual hosts of darkness.

Satan’s demons know that they are destined for hell. This point was clearly brought out during Jesus’ ministry. In one case, the demons pleaded with Jesus, *“Have You come here to torment us before the time?”* (Mt 8:29). They were, by the time Peter wrote 2 Peter, delivered *“into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment”* (2 Pt 2:4; see Jd 6).

This torment into which some demons begged Jesus not to be cast is identified as **the abyss** in Luke’s parallel account of **Luke 8:26-39** (See

Lk 8:31). Both Matthew and Mark used the word “torment” (See Mt 8:29; Mk 5:7). Luke says **abyss**. The abyss is the existence of torment into which Satan and his angels will be cast (See Rv 20:1,2).

The Greek word *abyssos* (abyss) is used nine times in the New Testament. It is used to refer to **the abode of demons** (See Lk 8:31) and **the abode of the dead** (See Rm 10:7). It has been translated “bottomless pit” in the *King James Version* in reference to a place of torment (See Rv 9:1,2,11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1,3). Its meaning as used in the New Testament should not be associated with the final place of condemnation of Satan and his angels. It is presently that realm of confinement by which God reserves Satan and his hosts for their final destiny in a fiery hell (See Rv 20:1-3).

## B. Hell Is For Ignorant Disobedient

**Hell is for those who know not God and who do not obey the gospel.** 2 Thessalonians 1:8,9 mentions two groups of people who are destined for the destruction of hell. Paul writes that Jesus is coming ...

*... in flaming fire taking vengeance on those [1] who do not know God, and [2] on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of God and from the glory of His power.*

It is easy to identify those who do not obey the gospel, and thus, will go into eternal destruction. However, those who “*do not know God*” are often ignored in our discussions because of some unanswerable conclusions we have developed as a result of inconsistently defining the duration of hell. In order to understand what Paul was saying in 2 Thessalonians 1, we must understand precisely who he was talking about in the verse.

**1.Those who do not know God will go into destruction.**

Taken literally, this would be those of all history who have not desired the existence of and obedience to the one true God. Almost all civilizations of the world have throughout history had some concept of a supreme being. However, this being has often been created after the likeness and desires of the religious world. Therefore, idolatry has existed throughout the world and throughout history. Idolaters are those who have ***“exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator”*** (Rm 1:25). They have ***“changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man”*** (Rm 1:23).

Those who have been ignorant of the one true and living God have often created gods after their own imagination, and thus all these are headed for the destruction of hell.

There is also the teaching that “those who do not know God” refers to those who know of God, but because of sin, do not understand (know) His loving character. Regardless of whether this was in the mind of Paul when he wrote 2 Thessalonians 1, this is a New Testament teaching, for John wrote, ***“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments”*** (1 Jn 2:3). One does not know the true God unless he emulates the character of God. ***“He who does not love does not know God, for God is love”*** (1 Jn 4:8).

Those who do not love cannot understand the true character of God, and thus, **do not know God.**

Those who do not obey the gospel, have, by their failure to respond to the gospel, testified that they do not know the God, who out of love, gave His only begotten Son for the sins of the world.

Those who do not know the God who gave His Son will thus be punished with destruction. **This destruction will come upon them because they do not know of the heart of God that moved Him**

**to send His Son into this world.** Therefore, whether 2 Thessalonians 1:8 is referring to those who do not have a knowledge of the one true God, or those who do not know God by emulating His loving character, and thus responding to the gospel, the result is the same. They will have no right to the presence of God for eternity, and thus will be destroyed from eternal existence.

In this dispensation of time on earth, we must include in Paul's statement of those who know not God in **2 Thessalonians 1**, the millions of the world who have never heard the truth about the true God of heaven. They will also suffer the punishment of "eternal destruction." Does this sound hard? Possibly so, if understood from some theological viewpoints. It is specifically hard if understood from the viewpoint that God will burn in unending cosmic fire those who have not had the opportunity to hear and obey the gospel. Such a theology may sound good in "fire and brimstone" sermons, but there are some serious contradictions to such a doctrine. (More on this later.)

Whatever our understanding of what hell is like, or the duration thereof, everyone who has not known the one true God about whom the Bible speaks, **will go to this hell.** This would include the Buddhist monk, Hindu priest, Islamic imam, and all others who have not searched for the one true and living God of love. It would thus include those who have refused to hear and obey the gospel when they were given the opportunity.

To some, this sounds too hard. **It sounds hard only because of our misunderstanding of duration of hell.** In order to understand the encompassing condemnation of all who do not know the one true God, and subsequently have an opportunity to obey the gospel, then possibly we should start by restudying our concept of hell. There seems to be a conflict of interpretation in the minds of some Christian thinkers on this point.

**If we believe in an endless punishment of the wicked in hell, then there is a logical contradiction between the loving merciful God in whom we believe, but at the same time this God will keep in existence those who have not had an opportunity to hear and obey the gospel.**

The contradiction is that the Bible teaches that the nature of God is loving and merciful. He is just, **not fiendish**. However, it is supposed by some that He will cast into an unending fiery torment billions of souls who have lived on the earth, **but never had the opportunity to hear and obey the gospel**. In eternity, He will occasionally check up on these burning souls in hell in order to make sure that their torment is continuing without end.

At the same time there are those who are supposedly burning endlessly in hell, but at the same time there are those who are enjoying heaven. But part of their enjoyment will be in the fact that there are those who are over in hell being tormented for their crimes against the righteous. If hell is endless torment for the persecutors of Christians, then for Christians in heaven not to become fiendish, they must be ignorant of the endless torment of their former persecutors.

The preceding poses a logical contradiction. The Bible defines God to be loving. However, **the Bible at the same time cannot define God to be loving while He is fiendish in reference to the burning without end those who did not obey the gospel**. Also, how can the righteous enjoy heaven when they know that friends and loved ones who never obeyed the gospel are somewhere over in eternity burning away in never ending torment? It takes no complex logic to figure out that there is something diabolically wrong with this belief. **It is simply not possible for God to be both loving and fiendish at the same time.**

We have found that many teachers simply ignore teaching on the subject of hell because they recognize the above logical contradiction in reference to the

traditional teaching of hell that contradicts the very character of God.

Christian teachers have dodged this issue by often refusing to even talk about the matter. There are also those who have developed the theology of universalism, that is, **God will not send anyone to hell**. Everyone will eventually be saved.

Then there are those who have developed a **theology of salvation by good works**. In other words, regardless of whether one has heard and obeyed the gospel, he or she will be judged and saved on the merit of their good works. In other words, one can be saved by living parallel to the gospel of Christ, while at the same time, being justified by their good works.

And then there is the doctrine of **salvation by ignorance**, that is, as long as one did not have a chance to hear the gospel, he or she will be saved. We are sure there are other theologies out there that have been developed in order to dodge the inconsistencies we develop as a result of the traditional understanding that hell is a place of unending burning.

What seems to be the case is that Christian thinkers are somehow fearful of challenging traditional concepts of hell, **even though these concepts deny the very nature of the God of love**. Some would rather invent false doctrines to steer souls around hell than to understand hell in a way that is consistent with the character of God. Others have simply written off the issue by saying that this is God's business and we should not concern ourselves with the matter. But any doctrine that is developed that questions the loving character of God is not just God's business. It is our business because we are the ones who have developed the inconsistent doctrines.

If God is fiendish, then we have denied the God of love. We have questioned the gospel of Jesus Christ that is the revelation of the love of God for humanity.

## 2. Those who do not obey the gospel will go to hell.

The gospel is the good news about the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins. It is His burial and resurrection to give us hope. It is His ascension to the right hand of God to reign over all things. Paul explained that the gospel is the fact *“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures”* (1 Co 15:1-4).

In order for one to **obey the gospel**, therefore, he or she must be buried with Christ and raised with Him. Paul explains this in **Romans 6:3-6**. He wrote, *“Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”* (Rm 6:4). Therefore, **by immersion in water in the name of Jesus one obeys the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.** Those who are immersed with Christ **will not go to hell.**

Those who do not obey the gospel when they have been given the opportunity to obey, will continue on their road to destruction when Jesus comes again.

## Chapter 4

### ■ The Destruction Of Hell ■

Paul reveals that the destruction of hell is “eternal.” We must keep in mind that the word *aionios* (eternal) in the 2 Thessalonians passage would emphasize the **quality** or **certainty** of the destruction with results that will continue without end (See **Library**, volume 48). It is everlasting (*aionios*) destruction in the sense that it will not be deterred. Those who do not know God, and do not obey the gospel, will suffer a certain destruction that will be complete after just punishment has been meted out for their sin. **The results of the destruction will not be reversed.**

**2 Thessalonians 1:9** should thus be understood with the interpretation that **“these will be punished**



**with destruction that has unending results.”** The word “destruction” means that **something is terminated**. The action of destruction would not continuously go on forever and ever. **Destruction would take place after just punishment has taken place**. The results of the destruction would continue forever. In other words, **those who are destroyed will not come back into existence**. Taken literally, **they are destroyed without end**. This interpretation makes more sense when we consider the nature of a just and merciful God of love who measures out punishment according to the nature of sin.

We must also consider the one who has lived according to Christian principles, but has not obeyed the gospel. We have read and heard numerous theories concerning what God will do with those who have never had a chance to hear and obey the gospel. Some conclusions that are made make God a fiendish and unjust God. Some have simply been led to believe that hell is an unending torment in literal fire and brimstone, and then simply shrugged off illogical and contradictory conclusions concerning what this might teach concerning our understanding of the nature of God.

We must deal with the challenge of harmonizing our concept of the nature of a loving and just God with the supposed doctrine of punishment in an unending torment that far exceeds the crime. We cannot simply say that it is God’s business and leave it at that. **Any teaching that makes God a fiendish and unloving deity simply cannot be true.**

**The atheist has the Christian logically cornered if we cannot answer this contradiction. He would ask, “You Christians believe in a benevolent and just God. And yet, you teach that He will punish beyond reason the wicked in an endless hell. Is not your God fiendish and unjust?”**

We cannot simply sidestep this accusation by the atheist. We must deal with this dilemma if we believe in an endless punishment for the wicked. It

is not enough to simply ignore a teaching that seems to contradict itself. Something so important as this teaching must be logically answered from the Bible. The following are a few thoughts, therefore, that we must investigate in reference to our definition of hell:

### A. God Is Not Fiendish

We must ask if those who have never heard the gospel be punished with the same degree of punishment as the most wicked person on earth? Will the Buddhist priest suffer the same hell as Hitler? Will the religionist who has lived according to Christian principles, but has never obeyed the gospel, be punished with a fiery hell? Will the good neighbor and good citizen of the community go to an unending hell because he or she has not known God, or having known God, never responded to the gospel? These are questions with which we must deal in reference to establishing a consistent world view as a Christian. We simply cannot just say these will all go to an unending hell, and ignore the inherent contradictions of a theology that attacks the very nature of God. Our answer to these questions reflects our world view and how we understand who God is.

**It is important to come to some conclusion concerning these questions because they manifest a very important part of our world view concerning the nature of God and the punishment of those who have not obeyed the gospel.**

The atheist has often logically cornered the Christian in a logical contradiction. He would question the Christian, "Do you believe that your God would confine to an endless fire and brimstone those who have lived good lives on earth, but have never had a chance to know God or obey the gospel?" **Our misunderstanding of the Scriptures on this point has made it impossible for us to answer this question without promoting the concept of a fiendish God.** In other words, God would be

fiendish to burn in unending fire and brimstone those who never had a chance to respond to the gospel.

We cannot simply answer that it is God's business and leave it at that. It is true that the destruction of hell is God's business. He will take care of the matter. However, we find it hard to believe that God has presented to mankind a teaching that assumes that He is fiendish and unjust, while at the same time He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.

### B. Hell Is Measured by Duration

**Punishment is measured by duration, not intensity.** In **Luke 12:42-48**, Jesus explained this in the parable of the faithful and wise steward. He spoke of the servant *“who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, will be beaten with many stripes”* (Lk 12:47). On the other hand, *“he who did not know, yet committed things worthy of stripes, will be beaten with few”* (Lk 12:48).

Does Jesus teach degrees of punishment in this parable? We think not. If we read the passage for what it says, it is hard to miss the interpretation that He teaches that *“to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more”* (Lk 12:48). **Jesus' emphasis in the parable is on duration**, not degrees of punishment.

Some have interpreted Jesus to refer to the **intensity** of hell and not to the duration. In other words, God will turn up the flames on Hitler, but lower them on the good religionist who never obeyed the gospel, but lived according to Christian principles. We have often affirmed that both will suffer the flames in endless duration, but with different intensities. Both would suffer hell without end, but with different degrees of torment. However, we need to question this interpretation.

**We must challenge ourselves not to create an understanding that makes God either fiendish**

**or unjust.** If emphasis in Jesus' parable of **Luke 12:42-48** is on **duration**, and not on intensity, then the picture changes. Those who have lived good lives, yet were outside a covenant relationship with God, would suffer hell, but their punishment would be with **"few stripes."** It takes less time to suffer few stripes than many stripes, **though the pain of each stripe is just as severe.**

**We would not want to suffer a single stripe in hell simply because all stripes are of the same intensity. The length of enduring the few over the many would certainly be less. Nevertheless, the intensity of each stripe would be the same.**

After the stripes have been given, then the destruction occurs for which there is no reverse. Punishment has thus been meted out for the crime and the lost are gone forever. **Their existence is terminated** (See Mt 10:28).

### **C. Hell Is Just Punishment**

God's punishment in the Old Testament always matched the crime. God is not pictured in the Old Testament as a mean or unjust God. The Sinai law was given with laws that were just and fair. In the law **"an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"** was the principle where punishment was given to match the crime (See Ex 21:23-27).

The same is true of God's punishment of the lost in the hell to come. What purpose would it be for the lost to still be suffering in hell a billion earth years into eternity? **Once the price of punishment for the crime was satisfied, then what reason would God have in continuing the punishment beyond reason and purpose?** God never worked in this way in His just punishment in the Old Testament. It is hard to believe that He would do such in eternity.

**We simply must be careful in this area of study lest we develop a theology that accuses God of being fiendish and unjust.**

If we believe in the unending punishment of the behaviorally good person who has not been baptized into a covenant relationship with God, then we must teach that God is unjust and unfair in punishment. This would only lead to the conclusion that God is also fiendish, that is, He takes pleasure in the punishment of the wicked. A billion earth years from now He would be this cosmic sadist who continually went to some far corner of existence to make sure the lost were still tormented for their forty or fifty years of ignorance a billion earth years in the past. In another billion years He would check back again, and then, again and again. **Is this the type of loving and merciful God we proclaim to the world?** Is this the God of love, mercy and justice that we read about in the Bible? **This is not the God of the Bible, but a god some have created after their own vengeful nature.** This teaching may bring some peace of mind to our fiendish desire to measure out retribution to those who torment us, **but our selfish desires of retaliation should not be the basis on which we would define the God of love that the Bible reveals.**

We must keep in mind that the “lack of knowledge” on the part of the ignorant in **2 Thessalonians 1:8,9** was the fault of the Christian and not the unbeliever. If those who know not God in this dispensation are lost, then who is responsible for their state of being lost?

We have often found that Christians are swift to condemn the “ignorant” to an unending punishment in hell for not knowing God, while at the same time, rationalizing or excusing themselves from the responsibility of not proclaiming the gospel of Jesus to all the world. **Who should suffer the punishment, the innocent ignorant or the knowledgeable lazy Christian?**

We have heard of another alternative interpretation to deal with those who “know not God,” but are condemned to destruction. This is the teaching that those who have never heard the gospel will be

judged by their good works. Though they have not known of the one true God, or the gospel of Jesus, they will stand before God in final judgment on the merit of their works. In other words, after death, good workers will be reserved for judgment and will have to take their chances with God on the legal merit of their good works on earth.

This may seemingly answer the problem of those who know not God. At least, it is an effort to steer us clear of a teaching that teaches that God is fiendish and unjust. However, there are some other New Testament teachings that must be harmonized with this teaching in order to justify salvation that would be based solely on the meritorious performance of good works.

First of all, Paul clearly stated that by works of law-keeping no one can be justified before God (See Rm 3:20; Gl 2:16). One cannot be saved by works of law **simply because all have sinned** (See Rm 3:23). No one can keep any law perfectly. Neither can good works atone for sin we commit, *“lest anyone should boast”* (Ep 2:9).

The sacrificial offering of Jesus would have been a useless, or at least, an unnecessary effort on the cross if one could be saved by meritorious works.

In other words, if people could be saved by good works, **then why the whole gospel plan of salvation in the first place** (See Gl 2:21)? If people could have been saved by good works, it seems that instead of the cross, God could have simply stayed with the law of the conscience for the Gentiles instead of going through the entire struggle with Israel and the church in order to bring the obedient into heaven. Jesus could have just stayed in heaven, in the spirit, without the incarnation for the cross (See Jn 1:1,2,14).

It is our belief that *“there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* (At 4:12). It is also our belief that in order for anyone to partake of the eternal existence of heaven, **they must hear and obey the gospel**

**of Jesus Christ.** Christians, therefore, have the responsibility of sharing what they have with those who do not have it.

We would be selfish if we did not share that which we have in the spiritual realm with those who do not have it. The Christian has a “piece of the pie.” He has eternal life and is destined, because of the blood of Jesus (See 2 Pt 3:13). If the Christian does not share this gospel information with others, then certainly he or she will be held accountable, not because he or she did not share the gospel, but because he or she was introverted, selfish, and unconcerned about the state of condemnation in which others presently live.

The whole world is headed for hell. All those who do not obey the gospel will suffer destruction. Though the duration of suffering may be different, and according to the sin of the condemned, the fact remains that we live in a world that is headed for destruction.

**As Christians, we have the hope of eternal life. We have been entrusted with the gospel of reconciliation that will give the lost a share of the hope that we have. The sharing nature of a true Christian should motivate us to preaching to gospel to those who do not have it.**



### ABBREVIATIONS OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

### NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**

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