

## RETHINKING ETERNITY, WEEK THREE

### DO THE UNSAVED SUFFER CONSCIOUS, ETERNAL TORTURE?

Intro: Review Eschatology / When we approach a subject like this, we need to do do with humility and grace. Hopefully, nobody wants anybody to suffer without end. At the same time, God's thoughts are not our thoughts - He has the right to do anything that He wants. And if it doesn't jive with human logic, we'll understand it all by and by. But the question we ought always to ask is. **"What does the Bible actually teach?"**

I'm going to be covering a lot of ground today... and as I said before, my goal is not that you'll all agree with my conclusions; it is to get you thinking and studying and wrestling with scripture to come to your own convictions.

To begin, let's look quickly at **4 Views of the destiny of people who don't follow Jesus.**

**Universalism** – all slopes lead to the same summit

- Here's the Christian - he follows Jesus, and runs straight to the summit
- Here's the Peaceful Muslim - he doesn't believe in Jesus, but loves Allah and tries to follow the tenets of his faith.
- Here's the Hindu, who goes through a winding road, following a number of the 3,000 gods of the Hindu religion, but trying to be a good person and eventually arriving.
- Here's the Pagan - he smokes a bit of weed, barhops on weekends, sleeps around... eventually he settles down and tries to live a more ordered life and be a 'good person.'

The is the first view... the second is...

**Endless Torment** – God keeps the soul alive in order to torture the unsaved forever. This is the traditional Christian view - what most of the main denominations and evangelicals are taught to believe.

**Annihilation** – the unsaved soul is destroyed instantaneously on the day of Judgment.

**Terminal Judgment**, which we'll explore toward the end of our lesson today. In order to work toward a balanced, biblical view, I want to answer 5 questions...

**Question 1: Is the idea of endless suffering** consistent with what the Bible says about God?

In **Genesis 18:23-25** - God and Abraham are having a conversation about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. In vs 23, read this... **"Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"**26 The Lord said, **"If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."**

Abraham here negotiates God to the point where if he found 10 righteous people, he would not execute judgement. It's the question Abraham asks that causes me to stop and think: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

**Romans 2:5-7**—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.

**6** God "will repay each person according to what they have done." **7** To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. **8** But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

I'm not trying to minimize the horrible nature of sin here; sin put our Lord on the cross. But we have to ask: does it seem just to punish **infinitely** for sins committed for a **finite period** on earth? Not according to this verse or the consistent pattern we see in the scriptures; if anything, God is more merciful and patient than we have any right to expect. So from the outset of our study, the idea of endless torment seems to be inconsistent with what we know about God.

**Question 2: Is man's soul immortal? Put another way, is immortality a default condition, or a conditional gift?** In these kinds of discussions you might often hear someone speak of our "eternal soul," or 'immortal soul.' It might interest you to know that those phrases never appear in either the Old or New Testament. Instead, the Bible speaks of the 'gift of immortality.'

- **Romans 2:7 – To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life....** Eternal life is always spoken of in a positive sense. We seek immortality; we are not born innately eternal.
- **1 Corinthians 15:54 – the perishable will be clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality...** this is spoken of disciples who have given their lives to Jesus, who are promised that one day what is mortal will be clothed in immortality!
- **Jude 20-21 – But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.** It is the mercy of Jesus that will bring us to eternal life
- **Matthew 19:29: And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.** The sacrifices we make in this life for the sake of Jesus will be multiplied 100-fold in the next; our inheritance is spoken of with the phrase, "eternal life."
- **Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.** The contrast here is between Death & Eternal Life
- **I John 2:25 And this is the promise that he promised us, even eternal life.** Eternal life is a promise that is given to those who serve God. This idea is made clear even in the most famous of NT verses, John 3:16

- **John 3:16** God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. Once again, the contrast is between ‘perishing’ and having eternal life.

So what might we conclude from these verses? Immortality is a **conditional** gift, given to those who obey the gospel of Jesus. This is a subject that the world is interested in – we all want to search for the mythical fountain of youth... its appeal is immortality! **But we are not born immortal – immortality is given to those who follow Jesus as a glorious gift!** This is the reason that we rejoice for faithful disciples who have finished the race! This is the reason we do not mourn like those who have no hope; our faithful friends and loved ones are receiving the gift that we all long for, and that gift is immortality—eternal life.

Let’s look at question 3, at the other side of the question...

### **Question 3: Does the Bible speak of degrees of punishment?**

- Let’s say that we have a young man who goes out drinking and dies tragically in an auto accident. Do we think that he’ll suffer the same fate and receive the same punishment as Osama Bin Laden, or Adolph Hitler, or Joseph Stalin? Logic would tell us “no”, but logic is secondary to scripture. What does scripture tell us? Let’s look.
- **Romans 2:5 - 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. 6** God “will repay each person according to what they have done.”

The unsaved stack up punishment by their stubborn unbelief and unrighteous living. They are judged according to what they have done - we see the same pattern in Revelation 20, beginning in verse 11...

- **Revelation 20:11-13** – Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. **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.

Just like Paul told us in Romans 2, these are judged ‘according to what they had done...’ We would then think that the punishment would fit the crime, right. Listen to the words of Jesus in Luke 12... beginning in verse 47...

- **Luke 12:47-48** – “The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. **48** But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

At the close of this parable about judgement, we are told that some will receive many blows and some will receive just a few. What are the implications of these verses?

- First, the punishment fits the crime (consistent with the rest of scripture)
- Next, the punishment has a definite conclusion – at some point, in the context of the words of Jesus, the blows stop falling, and the punishment ends. This leads us to question #4...

#### **Question 4: Does the Bible teach an end to suffering?**

- **Matt 7:13 – “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.** Where does the wide road lead? To eternal torment? No, to destruction. The contrast he paints is between life & destruction.
- **Heb 10:26-27 – 26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.** This passage teaches that the fire does not torment endlessly; it will consume completely.
- **2 Peter 3:7 – By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.** Once again, destruction is the destiny of the ungodly, not endless conscious torment.
- **Jude 5-7—In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.** (Note that in this verse, the only thing that is eternal is the fire; it is not the punishing)

Let’s talk about Sodom & Gomorrah. That judgment is held up as an example throughout scripture... 2 Peter 2:6 reasserts what Jude shared: **“God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.** So what do we learn here? What is the example?

- There will be a final judgment
- There will be a period of punishing
- There will be an end to the punishing – if you were to visit the southern end of the Dead Sea, we’d see that the smoke is no longer rising - the fire is out! The effect is eternal, as are the consequences, but the punishing is not eternal...there is no longer any smoke rising from Sodom and Gomorrah.

And then our final **Question of the day: What about the Hebrew and Greek Words often translated “Eternal”, or “Forever”? What is its meaning of in the scriptures?**

The Greek word, αἰώνιος, and its Hebrew equivalent are sometimes used of never-ending, but they are also defined as “age-lasting”.

- Sodom and Gomorrah – is the fire still burning?
- Jonah and the Fish – forever = 3 days. I’m sure it felt that way, being in the belly of the big fish for the better part of 72 hours... but it was an ‘era’, a specific period of time.

- Proverbs 22:28 – of an ‘ancient’ boundary stone.
- In Classical Greek, it was most often used to describe the totality of an age or dispensation. In some places it is used of unending time, but the definition of the word does not require that interpretation.
- However, even if we accepted a different definition of ‘eternal,’ that does not necessitate a belief in eternal conscious suffering – The extinction of the soul is eternal in its consequences.

### My Conclusions:

- Not Universalism: Biblically, this cannot be reconciled with scripture... John 14:6 “I am the way, etc...” There are hard teachings in scripture.
- Not Instant Annihilation – the Bible demands punishment for unforgiven sin.
- Not Endless Torment – it demands the gift of immortality to the unsaved, and ignores the scriptures about the destructive and consuming fire of Gehenna. In addition, the idea of endless torment leads to a distortion of God’s character as He has revealed it in His Word.

**There is a 4<sup>th</sup> View: “Terminal Punishment”** – a period of suffering, based on decisions we make and the life we choose to live, followed by the extinction of the soul. The young man who made foolish decisions might suffer briefly, but not forever... And all of the unrighteous will be judged and punished according to the actions of their lifetime.

The default position of historical Christianity is endless torment, but it has disappeared from popular teaching. Why is that? Clark Pinnock, a famous theologian and author, put it this way...

*“The doctrine of eternal torture makes God out to be morally worse than Hitler, who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for his enemies whom he does not even to die. How can one love a God like that? I suppose one might be afraid of but could we love and respect Him? Would we want to strive to be like Him mercilessness?”*

*allow Him, in His*

*“Let’s be honest here and tell it like it is: The doctrine of never-ending roasting torment makes God out to be a cruel, unjust, merciless monster.”*

From my studies of God’s word, this is what I currently believe about Biblical Eschatology. Terminal judgment allows for God’s judgment, for sin to be punished proportionally, while not giving finite crimes infinite punishment. It answers the five questions we’ve asked today, conclusively. There are other verses to consider, certainly, but the burden of proof lies with those who believe a doctrine inconsistent with the God of the Bible.

As you study, you may come to a different view. I would encourage you to study it out for yourself and wrestle with the implications.

For a more in-depth look, I’d point you to these resources:

- Douglas Jacoby’s article, **Terminal Judgement**, available online @ [douglasjacoby.com](http://douglasjacoby.com)...
- Lee Boger, **What Happens After You Die?** (Part 1 of 2) <https://youtu.be/x4qMsn7hA6k>
- Lee Boger, **What Happens After You Die?** (Part 2 of 2) <https://youtu.be/m8MatLqZQxs>

- Edward Fudge, **“The Fire That Consumes”**... this is the most thorough resource