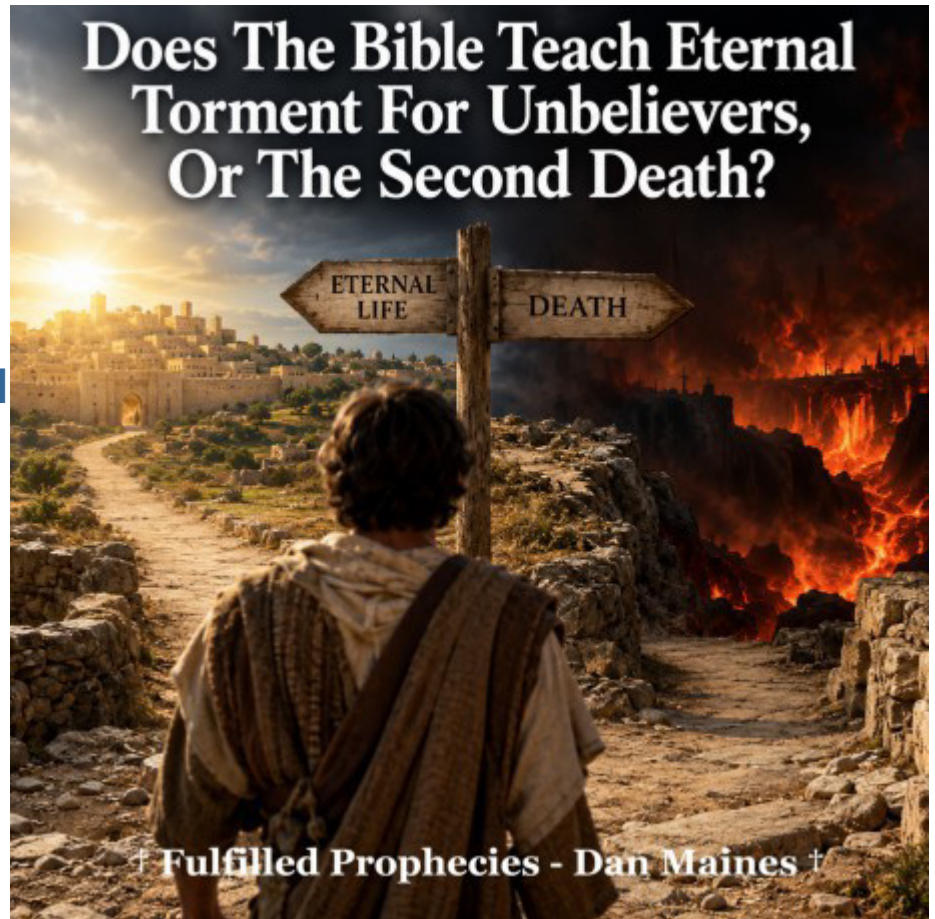


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Hell - Does The Bible Teach Eternal Torment For Unbelievers, Or The Second Death?



† Fulfilled Prophecies - Dan Maines †

By Dan Maines

Does The Bible Teach Eternal Torment For Unbelievers, Or The Second Death?

Introduction

† Revelation 20:10 unquestionably uses the language of torment day and night for ever and ever concerning the devil, the beast, and the false prophet. We shouldn't weaken that verse or pretend it says something it doesn't say. The real question is whether Scripture says the same thing about every unbelieving person who is cast into the lake of fire.

† When Revelation immediately describes the fate of those

whose names aren't found in the book of life, it doesn't say that they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. It says they're cast into the lake of fire, and the passage identifies the lake of fire as the second death (Revelation 20:14-15).

† That distinction matters. We shouldn't take language applied to the devil, beast, and false prophet in verse 10 and automatically insert it into verses 14-15. We need to allow Scripture to define the fate of the unbeliever in its own words.

† Throughout Scripture the contrast isn't eternal life in heaven versus eternal life in torment. The repeated contrast is life versus death, salvation versus destruction, and eternal life versus perishing (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Matthew 10:28).

† This doesn't minimize God's judgment. The second death is final judgment. The question isn't whether the judgment is serious or eternal in its consequence. The question is whether the Bible teaches eternal conscious torment for every unbeliever, or an irreversible death from which there is no resurrection to life.

Revelation 20:10

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

† This is the strongest verse for everlasting torment in Revelation, and we should begin by admitting exactly what it says. The devil, beast, and false prophet are described as being tormented day and night for ever and ever.

† But notice what the verse doesn't say. It doesn't say every unbelieving human being will be consciously tormented forever. That conclusion has to be brought into the verse from somewhere else.

† Revelation uses highly symbolic judgment language throughout the book. The beast and false prophet represent enemies of God and His people, rather than requiring us to understand every statement as a description of individual human beings experiencing physical conditions (Revelation 13:1-18; 19:20).

† We therefore shouldn't make Revelation 20:10 say more than John actually wrote. The fate of people outside the book of life is specifically addressed a few verses later.

Revelation 20:14-15

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

† Here John gives us an inspired definition. The lake of fire is the second death. He doesn't call it eternal life in misery. He calls it death.

† Death and Hades themselves are also thrown into the lake of fire. That shows the imagery is communicating complete and final judgment, because death and Hades aren't physical people capable of being burned in literal fire (1 Corinthians 15:26, 54-55).

† Verse 15 says those not found in the book of life are cast into that same lake. John had just defined what that means, the second death.

† If John intended to teach that every unbeliever would remain consciously alive in torment forever, this would've been the clearest place to say it. Instead, the inspired explanation is the second death.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.

† Jesus presents two alternatives, perish or have eternal life. He doesn't present eternal life in joy versus eternal life in torment.

† Those who believe receive eternal life. Those who don't believe perish. The ordinary force of perish is destruction or loss of life, and the same Greek verb is repeatedly used in contexts involving actual death and destruction (Matthew 2:13; Luke 13:3; 1 Corinthians 10:9-10).

† If unbelievers remain consciously alive forever, we have to explain why Jesus described their alternative to eternal life as perishing.

† Eternal life is God's gift through Christ. Scripture doesn't describe eternal conscious existence as an inherent possession of every human being.

Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

† Paul gives the same contrast Jesus gave. The wages of sin is death, while God's gift is eternal life.

† Paul doesn't say the wages of sin is eternal life in torment. He says death.

† Eternal life belongs to those who are in Christ. That's why Paul's contrast is so important. One side receives death, while the other receives life (Romans 5:17-21).

† If the punishment for sin is everlasting conscious existence, we'd expect Paul to describe it that way. Instead, his language consistently contrasts death with life.

Matthew 10:28

And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

† Jesus doesn't say God merely torments the soul and body while preserving them forever. He says God is able to destroy both.

† The word translated hell here is Gehenna. Jesus' Jewish audience would've recognized Gehenna as powerful judgment imagery connected with destruction and divine judgment (Jeremiah 7:31-33).

† The important word in Jesus' statement is destroy. Human persecutors could kill the body, but God's judgment was greater and final.

† This agrees with the language of perishing, death,

destruction, and the second death found elsewhere in Scripture.

2 Thessalonians 1:8-9

in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God, and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These people will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

† Paul actually uses the expression eternal destruction. That's extremely important when considering what eternal punishment means.

† The punishment is eternal in its result because the destruction isn't reversed. Eternal destruction doesn't require an eternal process of destroying that never succeeds.

† Something can have an eternal consequence without the action producing that consequence continuing forever. The judgment is irreversible.

† This fits naturally with Revelation's second death. The finality of the punishment is eternal because there is no restoration from that judgment.

Matthew 25:46

These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

† This verse is often presented as decisive proof of eternal conscious torment because both punishment and life are described as eternal.

† But Jesus says eternal punishment, not eternal punishing. The punishment can be eternal because its consequence is permanent.

† Paul helps define that concept when he speaks of eternal destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Destruction can be an everlasting punishment precisely because the person doesn't return from that destruction.

† Eternal life is everlasting possession of life. Eternal punishment is an everlasting judgment. The adjective describes the permanence of each result without requiring both

experiences to function in exactly the same manner.

Revelation 14:10-11

he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."

† This passage can't simply be ignored. It speaks plainly of torment and of the smoke of their torment ascending for ever and ever.

† But Revelation is drawing heavily from Old Testament prophetic judgment language. Isaiah used nearly identical language concerning the historical judgment of Edom (Isaiah 34:9-10).

† The point of smoke ascending forever isn't necessarily that the people remain alive forever inside the fire. In prophetic language, permanently ascending smoke signifies complete, irreversible destruction.

† Revelation 14 also says they have no rest day and night while the judgment is being described. That emphasizes the severity and completeness of God's wrath against the beast and those identified with its rebellion.

† We therefore have to interpret Revelation's symbols through the prophetic Scriptures that supplied John's imagery rather than building an entire doctrine from the imagery while ignoring its Old Testament background.

Isaiah 34:9-10

Its streams will be turned into pitch, And its loose earth into brimstone, And its land will become burning pitch. It will not be extinguished night or day; Its smoke will go up forever. From generation to generation it will be desolate; None will pass through it forever and ever.

† Isaiah provides one of the clearest biblical backgrounds for

Revelation's language. Edom's smoke would go up forever, and its fire wouldn't be quenched night or day.

† This wasn't teaching that Edom would remain physically burning without end. It was prophetic language describing a devastating and irreversible judgment.

† An unquenchable fire is a fire that can't be stopped before it accomplishes God's purpose. Everlasting smoke testifies that the judgment was complete.

† Revelation uses this established prophetic vocabulary when describing covenant judgment. We shouldn't automatically convert symbolic judgment language into a description of people possessing immortal bodies that can never die.

Malachi 4:1

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of armies, so that it will leave them neither root nor branches.

† Malachi describes the wicked as stubble consumed by fire. The picture isn't of stubble remaining forever while continually burning without being consumed.

† The fire burns them up. Neither root nor branch remains. This is destruction language, not preservation language.

† This prophetic background helps us understand why fire in biblical judgment passages doesn't automatically mean eternal conscious existence in flames.

1 Timothy 6:15-16

which He will bring about at the proper time-He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

† Scripture doesn't teach that human beings possess immortality independently of God. Paul says God alone possesses immortality inherently.

† Eternal life is repeatedly described as God's gift, not

something every person naturally possesses regardless of whether they're in Christ (Romans 2:7; 6:23).

† This raises an important question for the traditional view. If the unbeliever must consciously exist forever and can never cease living, where does Scripture say that God gives the unbeliever immortality for the purpose of eternal torment?

† Scripture consistently associates immortality and eternal life with God's saving work rather than presenting immortality as the unavoidable destiny of everyone.

Historical References

† Josephus described the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 with horrifying scenes of fire, death, famine, and devastation. His account in Wars of the Jews records judgment that physically consumed the city, temple, and countless lives. His testimony helps us understand how severe first-century judgment language could correspond to actual historical destruction.

† Justin Martyr argued that the human soul shouldn't be regarded as inherently immortal in the same sense as God. In Dialogue with Trypho, he challenged the idea that souls possess life independently and emphasized their dependence upon God.

† Irenaeus likewise connected continued existence with God's gift of life. In Against Heresies, he argued that life doesn't originate within us independently but is bestowed by God.

† Early Christian writers weren't completely uniform concerning the final punishment of the wicked. Some language in early Christianity was understood as conscious punishment, while other writers strongly emphasized mortality, destruction, and life as God's gift. History therefore shouldn't replace Scripture as our authority.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We don't need to soften God's judgment to reject something Scripture doesn't clearly teach. The second death is serious precisely because it's final.

† We also shouldn't allow one symbolic passage in Revelation to erase the repeated biblical contrast between life and death. Jesus said perish or eternal life. Paul said death or eternal life. Revelation says the second death (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Revelation 20:14-15).

† Revelation 20:10 must remain exactly where Scripture places it. It describes the devil, beast, and false prophet as tormented day and night for ever and ever. We shouldn't change that statement.

† But we also shouldn't change Revelation 20:14-15. When John describes those outside the book of life, he identifies their destination as the second death.

† The Bible never calls the fate of unbelievers eternal life in hell. Eternal life is God's gift in Christ. The language applied to the wicked is perishing, death, destruction, being burned up, and the second death (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Matthew 10:28; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 20:14-15).

† This doesn't mean God's judgment is temporary or insignificant. Eternal destruction is eternal because the result can't be reversed. The second death is final.

† If you're dead, you're dead. Scripture doesn't say God gives unbelievers everlasting life so they can remain alive somewhere else forever. It says the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

† Our hope isn't merely escape from punishment. Our hope is life in Christ. He alone is the source of life, and everyone who believes in Him doesn't perish but has eternal life (John 3:16).

Q & A Appendix

Q: Doesn't Revelation 20:10 plainly teach eternal torment?

A: Yes, it plainly uses that language concerning the devil, beast, and false prophet. But Revelation 20:14-15 describes those outside the book of life differently. Their fate is identified as the second death.

Q: Doesn't Revelation 14:11 say the smoke of their torment rises forever?

A: Yes, but that language has an Old Testament prophetic background. Isaiah described Edom's smoke as rising forever even though the point was complete and irreversible destruction, not a land literally burning throughout endless time (Isaiah 34:9-10).

Q: What about eternal punishment in Matthew 25:46?

A: Eternal punishment doesn't require an eternal process of punishing. Paul speaks of eternal destruction, showing that destruction can have an everlasting result (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Q: Doesn't everyone have an immortal soul?

A: Scripture says God alone inherently possesses immortality and presents eternal life as God's gift through Christ (1 Timothy 6:16; Romans 6:23). We shouldn't assume inherent human immortality and then use that assumption to interpret the judgment passages.

Q: Then what happens to the unbeliever?

A: Scripture describes the outcome with words such as perish, death, destroy, destruction, burned up, and second death (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Matthew 10:28; Malachi 4:1; Revelation 20:14-15).

Q: Does this make God's judgment less serious?

A: No. Final destruction is an irreversible judgment. The second death isn't temporary correction followed by another opportunity. Scripture presents it as the final opposite of eternal life (Revelation 20:14-15).

Q: Why does this distinction matter?

A: Because we should say exactly what Scripture says. Where Scripture says torment, we should say torment. Where Scripture says destruction, we should say destruction. Where Scripture says death, we shouldn't change death into everlasting life in another location (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; 2 Thessalonians

1:9).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Revelation 20:10; Revelation 20:14-15; John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Matthew 10:28; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Matthew 25:46; Revelation 14:10-11; Isaiah 34:9-10; Malachi 4:1; 1 Timothy 6:15-16

† Josephus, Wars of the Jews; Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho; Irenaeus, Against Heresies

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