

## Rethinking Hell: The Second Death and the Final State of the Lost

If you grew up with any connection to Christianity, you probably were taught that hell is a place of everlasting torment. Hell has been pictured as a place of endless suffering experienced by the lost throughout eternity. Theologians go to great lengths to harmonize this horrible thought of millions in forever distress with the goodness of God, the love of God, and the grace of God. Rather than try to bend what we clearly know about God's goodness, grace, and love to accommodate this hideous vision, maybe it is our doctrine of hell that needs to change. Maybe we haven't understood properly the finality of the second death and the final state of the lost; those who have refused to believe the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

I would like to take us through a flow of verses that I think paint a scriptural picture of the final state of the lost. And I believe that state is annihilation based on the Scriptures that follow. I invite you to keep an open mind and listen for the voice of Jesus as you contemplate this argument for the final state of the lost. All of these verses are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and **take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever**"-- <sup>23</sup> **therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken.** (Genesis 3:22-23)

God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden so they would not eat of the tree of life and live forever. The hope of living forever was lost in the fall. Immortality for mankind was lost at the fall.

<sup>8</sup> **Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,** <sup>9</sup> **who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,** <sup>10</sup> **but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.** (II Timothy 1:8-10)  
Immortality that was lost at the fall only comes back to us through the gospel (vs 10). Only believers will live forever. The lost are still "in Adam" and immortality is not in their future. Believers are "in Christ" and will live forever. Immortality was brought to us when we believed the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.** (Revelation 2:7)

<sup>1</sup> Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, <sup>2</sup> in the middle of its street. **On either side of the river was the tree of life,** bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. <sup>3</sup> There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; <sup>4</sup> they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. (Revelation 22:1-4)

The "Tree of Life" is coming back around in the book of Revelation, and the immortality that goes with it is only for the redeemed. The foundation for the rest of this presentation is the idea that immortality is only reserved for the saved.

Let's look at the fate of the wicked in the Psalms.

<sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away. <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. <sup>6</sup> For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but **the way of the wicked will perish.** (Psalm 1:4-6)

The wicked are like chaff that the wind drives away and are gone forever. The way of the wicked will perish.

<sup>38</sup> **But all sinners will be destroyed; there will be no future for the wicked.** (Psalm 37:38)

The wicked have no future because all sinners have been destroyed. "Destroyed" says to me that this is the end of the wicked. They will be no more.

<sup>7</sup> That when the wicked sprouted up like grass, and all who did iniquity flourished. It was only that **they might be destroyed forevermore.** <sup>8</sup> But You, O LORD, are on high forever. <sup>9</sup> For, behold, Your enemies, O LORD, for, behold, **Your enemies will perish.** All who do iniquity will be scattered. (Psalm 92:7-9)

The wicked will be destroyed. God's enemies will perish.

Throughout the Psalms the end of the wicked is said to be death, destruction, perishing, vanishing, being no more. Because, in this earthly life, the wicked often prosper and the righteous are cut off (see Psalm 73), I believe the Psalms are talking about man's ultimate destiny when using this language; death and final destruction for the wicked, and eternal life for the righteous.

Now, let's turn to the gospels. First up, is John the Baptist.

<sup>11</sup> As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but **He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.** (Matthew 3:11-12)

Jesus' ultimate judgment will destroy the wicked like chaff, burned up by a fire that is unquenchable – not meaning that it will last forever, but rather that it cannot be put out until it has accomplished its goal.

Next, the words of Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and **the way is broad that leads to destruction,** and there are many who enter through it. <sup>14</sup> For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

The end of those who find the wide path is destruction. The end of the lost is destruction.

<sup>28</sup> **Do not fear 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.** (Matthew 10:28)

Both the body and the soul will be "destroyed" in hell. There is no suggestion of an ongoing existence or ongoing experience. "Destroy" both body and soul suggests to me that nothing continues on for the lost after the second death.

<sup>40</sup> So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, <sup>42</sup> and will **throw them into the furnace of fire**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:40-42)

Those who commit lawlessness, i.e. the lost, will be destroyed in the furnace of fire. Will there be pain and suffering (weeping and gnashing of teeth)? Yes, but we are given no indication that this suffering will last forever.

<sup>8</sup> If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be **cast into the eternal fire**. <sup>9</sup> If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be **cast into the fiery hell**. (Matthew 18:8-9)

This is our first verse with the word “eternal” and this is really the crux of the debate. Do you believe that life in a “fiery hell” for the lost will be an ongoing and forever experience - your definition of “eternal” (often called the traditional view)? Or, do you believe “eternal” means that the effect or result of the fire lasts forever, not the experience. (This view is often called conditional immortality.)

I believe the fire is “eternal” in the sense that its effect lasts forever. I believe the fire destroys all who enter. I believe the result of this destruction will never be reversed for all of eternity. But I do not believe that it is an ongoing experience for all of eternity.

<sup>46</sup> **These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.** (Matthew 25:46)  
“Eternal punishment” – this punishment is eternal because the result of this punishment will last forever. The lost who undergo the “second death” (Revelation 20:14-15) will never come back. The punishment is permanent, lasting all through eternity. But this punishment is not necessarily experienced forever. Only the righteous experience a life that never ends.

<sup>16</sup> **For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.** (John 3:16)

The believer will obtain eternal life. The unbeliever will perish.

<sup>27</sup> **My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;** <sup>28</sup> **and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.** (John 10:27-28)

The believer has been granted eternal life and will never perish. This suggests that the lost will perish. Throughout the gospel of John the promise of life that lasts forever is always for the believer in Jesus.

Now, we turn to the letters of the apostles.

<sup>23</sup> **For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 6:23)

Again the contrast is between death for those who deserve God’s judgment because of their sin and eternal life by the gift of God for those who believed in Jesus. I believe the final death – “the second death” – for the wages of sin is permanent and a final end that is not experienced forever.

<sup>51</sup> Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and **this mortal must put on immortality.** <sup>54</sup> But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and **this mortal will have put on immortality,** then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory." (I Corinthians 15:51-54)

Only the saved will put on immortality. Only the saved will live forever.

<sup>7</sup> When the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, <sup>8</sup> dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> **These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction,** away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, <sup>10</sup> when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed--for our testimony to you was believed. (II Thessalonians 1:7-10)

The lost will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction. Eternal = the result of this destruction will last forever. There is no suggestion that this destruction will be experienced forever.

<sup>6</sup> And if **He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter;** ... <sup>12</sup> But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, **will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed,** (II Peter 2:6, 12)

Just as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed to ashes and extinction, so shall destruction be the end for the ungodly. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is not an ongoing experience for these cities. They were destroyed and done away with.

<sup>7</sup> Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, **are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.** (Jude 1:7)

Again the complete destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, over and done with, is an example of what will happen in the "eternal fire". The results of the fire will last forever. There is no indication that experiencing the fire in real time lasts forever.

This Sodom and Gomorrah picture of the fate of the lost makes me think of their destruction this way. Suppose your home burned down in a fire. If you never clean it up, if you never rebuild, it would be safe to say that the destruction of the fire will last forever. The result of the fire will last forever. The house will be burned up forever. But the burnt up studs and sheetrock would not be experiencing the fire forever. They would have already been consumed by the fire even as the result of the fire lasts forever.

Finally, we turn to the "second death" as revealed in the book of Revelation.

<sup>11</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. **He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'** (Revelation 2:11)

Only the lost will face the second death.

<sup>6</sup> Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; **over these the second death has no power**, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:6)

Only those who are not part of the first resurrection, i.e. the lost, will incur the second death.

<sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. <sup>14</sup> Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. **This is the second death, the lake of fire.** <sup>15</sup> And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:12-15)

The lake of fire, the destiny for the lost, the destiny for those not found written in the book of life, is the second death. I believe the lake of fire represents a final and complete death, not an ongoing experience. I believe the lake of fire will consume and destroy all who enter.

<sup>7</sup> He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. <sup>8</sup> But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the **lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.**" (Rev 21:7-8 NASB)

Those outside the family of God will incur the second death. I believe the second death is the final annihilation of the lost. I believe the second death is the fire that consumes.

We now come to two passages in the book of Revelation that appear to challenge the idea that the ultimate destiny of the lost is death, not ongoing torment.

<sup>10</sup> 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.** (Revelation 20:10)

This is specific to the devil, the beast, and the false prophet. Does not necessarily speak to the state of all the lost.

<sup>9</sup> Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> **And the smoke of their torment goes up 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." (Revelation 14:9-11)

This seems specific to those who during the tribulation period received the mark of the beast. I don't know that we can assume this verse applies to the lost of all time. Interesting to note in this particular verse: this "torment" takes place "in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb" suggests this is taking place at a moment of judgment, not as part of the eternal state.

In the world of Christianity, both in academia and among lay people, there is a vast range of uncertainty and disagreement regarding the symbolism and allegory of the book of Revelation. Because of this wide variety of views on exactly what Revelation is describing, I would not put the full weight of our understanding of hell solely based on these last two passages in light of everything else the Bible says about the finality of the second death.

## Summary

I believe only those who have embraced the gospel have immortality promised to them (II Timothy 1:10). Only those who have access to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22, Revelation 2:7, Revelation 22:2) have immortality promised to them. The promise of eternal life given by Jesus and the apostles countless times in the New Testament is to those who believe. The final destiny of the lost appears to be death, destruction, perish, vanish, are no more, etc. I believe the final destiny of the lost is annihilation in the second death.

Let me close with a personal note. You might be thinking that I have come to this conclusion because I just don't like the horror of the traditional view of hell. Let me put it this way. I honestly believe that the traditional view is not well-supported by the Scriptures. But I also lean into this new view of hell because I believe it is a better fit with what we know about God. Is God a God of justice? Will there be punishment for the wicked? Yes, and His wrath will be poured out upon the lost at the second death. But an ongoing torment? In my view, that just does not fit any reasonable expectation of God's glory, love, grace, and justice.

I also believe the image of God brought by the traditional view is harmful to our presentation of the gospel. We can explain all we want about man's sin being the cause of God's judgment against him. But there is no getting around the image of God as a cosmic bully when ongoing torment comes into the picture. In my view, the traditional view of hell is an unnecessary and ongoing stumbling block to those both in and out of the faith. And it is a burden we no longer need to bear.

For Further Reading:

Fudge, E. W., *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994)

Wenham, John, *Facing Hell: An Autobiography 1913-1996*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998)