

# ETERNAL TORTURE— Divine or Human Vengeance?

BY GREG ALBRECHT

**H**ell is a subject many religious people get hot and bothered about. It's one of the most disputed and controversial teachings within Christendom. The squabbling is not about the surety of judgment for depravity and wickedness.

Most Christians agree that there is and will be divine judgment for evil. The battle for hell is all about specifications, temperature and longevity. The debate involves comprehending and communicating divine justice—and in the process humans export definitions of time and space into eternity.

But the Bible does not suggest that God needs to import our flawed perspectives into the perfection of his eternity. While the Bible is remarkably silent about hell's specifications, cool heads seldom prevail when precise speculations about hell are on the table. When theories such as the degree of suffering that exists in hell—how hot hell is and how long it lasts—are under discussion, blood pressures rise and tension fills the room.

Some Christians take the view that hell is the battleground of true faith. Some draw a line in the sand in defense of the hottest kind of hell possible. Any other view of hell is discounted as a liberal, progressive, faith-denying, slippery-slope perspective that owes its existence to soft-headed humans rather than a theology that insists on sinners in the hands of an angry God. In some religious circles, belief in the most excruciating hell that humans can imagine and describe has come to be seen as one of the acid tests of true Christianity.

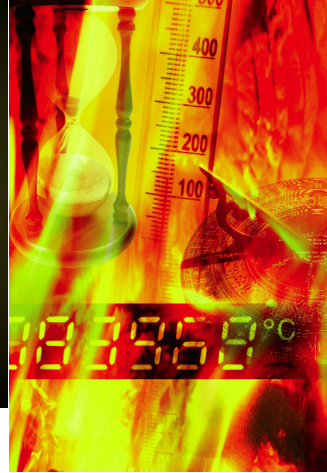
There are Christians who believe in judgment, but they are not as dogmatic about all of the details. I am one of those Christians. I believe in the judgment of hell, as

defined as eternal separation from God, but I am far from dogmatic about specifics. I believe that the presumed necessity of eternal torture as a vindication and satisfaction of God's wrath is a violent contradiction of God's love and character as revealed in the Bible.

I am skeptical about a hell that is defined as retributive justice—the belief that God inflicts suffering on sinners because they deserve it. I reject the idea that God's wrath is appeased by humans (or at least their souls) being slowly roasted on a spit. Retributive justice is not a characteristic of the God I know. I do believe that biblical evidence teaches us that God will judge evil, but I remain unconvinced that he will eternally torture anyone with



THE DEBATE INVOLVES COMPREHENDING AND COMMUNICATING DIVINE JUSTICE—AND IN THE PROCESS HUMANS EXPORT DEFINITIONS OF TIME AND SPACE INTO ETERNITY.



THE BATTLE FOR HELL IS ALL ABOUT SPECIFICATIONS, TEMPERATURE AND LONGEVITY.

never-ending physical, mental and emotional punishment.

### Defending Our Own Private Hell?

There is no doubt that scriptures about hell can be interpreted in a variety of ways—and they are. Those conflicting interpretations are informed by the theological and spiritual baggage of interpreters. I have mine, and you have yours. Our baggage may help us arrive at sound theological conclusions, or our baggage may weigh us down and lead us far from the truth.

It seems that the view of hell that expositors, preachers and teachers of the Bible wind up with is invariably the view that they begin with, as they look to the Bible for “proof.” So while we do need to examine biblical evidence, when it comes to hell we need to understand that biblical evidence is often co-opted to accommodate

pre-existing belief. Albert Einstein cautioned, “A man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be.”

Many Christians who describe themselves as conservative or fundamentalist believe that the very authority of the Bible is on the line in this battle for and of hell. They believe that only a literal hell of eternal torture “lines up” with biblical authority. The hell they protect is the hell they have been taught. The hell they protect is the hell that they may need in order to continue the status quo of their religious worldview. Some are so convinced of the rightness and necessity of their religious hell that any evidence or logic that challenges their view is discarded.

The hell of eternal torture is the big stick for many religious groups. It is the disciplinary cattle prod used to threaten and goad their flock in what they define as the right religious direction. While hell characterized by extreme divine prejudice may be a persuasive whip to keep the chain gang in line, it is hardly an effective way to help people come to know God. After all, those people who do enlist because they don’t want their behinds left behind are not being attracted to some version of religious boot camp because of God’s matchless and supreme love.

On the other extreme, there are Christians who believe that God’s judgment for the wicked is, or will be, the equivalent of a quick nuke in the microwave—fast, efficient

and relatively painless. They see the energy and heat released by nuclear fusion as a metaphor of the painless incineration God will surely mete out on evil. Sometimes called annihilationists, such Christians seem to picture God as a kindly Dr. Kevorkian, administering a lethal injection (that results in a painless death) to sinners on hell’s death row.

While I do not believe in a hell of eternal torture, neither do I embrace annihilationism. Both fail to address all the biblical evidence, and both fail, in my opinion, to fully comprehend our heavenly Father, whose primary and central attribute is love.

Hell is, as I understand it, eternal separation from God, but I believe our physicality, our limitations in terms of logic and language, do not allow us to specifically identify the dimensions of God’s judgment. I cannot conclude that God’s judgment will be retributive, or equal, to the pain and suffering that the wicked may have caused during their lives, for I have no substantial biblical evidence upon which to base such a theory. Most importantly, the nature of God mitigates against the hell of eternal torture.

### Speculations About Hell’s Specifications

The literal view of a hell of eternal torture is that it is a place of intense suffering, with heat, fire and smoke as the primary ingredients. This literal view assumes our sensory experiences of fire and destruction as defined by our dimension of flesh and blood are one and the same as eternal pain and suffering.

But is hell a place? Does it exist right now, or will it be fired up at some later time? Dante Alighieri

I BELIEVE IN THE JUDGMENT OF HELL, AS DEFINED AS ETERNAL SEPARATION FROM GOD, BUT I AM FAR FROM DOGMATIC ABOUT SPECIFICS.



I BELIEVE THAT THE PRESUMED NECESSITY OF ETERNAL TORTURE AS A VINDICATION AND SATISFACTION OF GOD’S WRATH IS A VIOLENT CONTRADICTION OF GOD’S LOVE AND CHARACTER AS REVEALED IN THE BIBLE.



THIS IDEA—THAT THE GOD OF MERCY AND GRACE WILL ACTUALLY SEE TO IT THAT SOULS ARRIVING IN HELL WILL BE EQUIPPED WITH A BODY SUIT, ENSURING THAT THEY WILL EXPERIENCE ETERNAL PAIN—IS ADVANCED BY OTHERWISE REASONABLE HUMANS WHO SEEM TO BE OVERWHELMED WITH THEIR SINCERE DEVOTION TO RELIGION.

can be shocking, when contrasted with a God of love, the eternal torture of hell can also be a teaching that appeals to the human mind. Humanly, we don't like to think that someone will be able to do something "bad" and not have to pay for it. We want to be assured that divine justice means that no one will ever be able to get away with anything. Some speak of God's wrath needing to be satisfied, but this forensic sense of justice is actually a human innovation that only satisfies our human sense of fair play. But we

insist that such explanations are nothing more than watered down theological mush.

But how can hell be a physical, geographically appointed and bounded "place" (either in past and present eternity or an inferno

whose coals of retribution are yet to be stoked) where the physical pain of eternal torture is suffered by disembodied souls?

Some literalists offer the hypothesis that God will equip the souls of those deemed unworthy of heaven with special bodysuits, complete with pain receptors, upon their arrival in hell. This idea—that the God of mercy and grace will actually see to it that souls arriving in hell will be equipped with a body suit, ensuring that they will experience eternal pain—is advanced by otherwise reasonable humans who seem to be overwhelmed with their sincere devotion to religion. According to some, God's wrath must be appeased, so souls arriving in hell will be measured and fitted for body suits by God, rather than from Satan's sadistic arsenal of torture toys.

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**Eternal Torture—Does It Satisfy God or Satisfy Us?**

While such a hell of endless torture

should not transfer our sense of fair play to God and assume he desires to be appeased as we do. Do you remember when you were a young child, taking pains to point out to your parents something that your sibling was doing that warranted punishment? Your sensibilities were offended at seeing your sibling getting away with something, especially if you had already been disciplined for the same infraction. Your moral equilibrium needed to be satisfied. You may have heard the story of the religious man who used to lie awake at night, unable to sleep, because he was convinced that somewhere, someone was getting away with something. Eternal torture in hell can comfort us because it reinforces the human desire for justice and fair play. But the Bible teaches that God works in human lives by his grace, not by human definitions of fair play. And the Bible definitely tells us that humans do not always comprehend the magnitude of God's amazing

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IN SOME RELIGIOUS CIRCLES, BELIEF IN THE MOST EXCRUCIATING HELL THAT HUMANS CAN IMAGINE AND DESCRIBE HAS COME TO BE SEEN AS ONE OF THE ACID TESTS OF TRUE CHRISTIANITY.

posited hell as a huge inverted cone that pierces to the very heart of the earth. While biblical references to hell include several earthly locations, non-temporal references are also given.

One of the logical arguments about heaven and hell is that for one to literally exist, the other must as well. This logical conundrum has been solved for many Christians by adopting the belief that heaven is defined as eternity spent in God's presence, while hell is eternal separation from God. But the hell-happy literalists are not amused with what they see as prevarication. They

grace.

There is a thin line between “I’m going to see that you get what’s coming to you” and “God is going to see that you get what’s coming to you.” We have our ideas of justice, often based in the Old Testament based ethic of an eye for an eye, but our ideas remain our ideas. No matter how devoted we may be to a human theologian or a systematic theology that demands the appeasement of God’s wrath, this truth remains—how God handles adversaries (his and ours) is his business. Paul reminds us, “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

Many of the hair-raising, spine-tingling, bone-chilling graphic descriptions of hell that I have heard and read come from religious sources and platforms that would condemn the same explicit language, used in another context, as gratuitous and barbarous, pandering to the human lust for bloodshed and violence. But such is the passion to see God’s justice that, failing a specific biblical foundation, vigilante justice takes over. Religious lynch mobs roam Christendom, insisting the eternal torture they proclaim is serving God (see John 16:2).

It is religion that insists that those who fail to pass religious muster here on earth will eternally pay for their failure to measure up. Hell is, or will be, says much of Christendom, populated by the “unsaved.” Unsaved? Who are they, exactly?

The “unsaved” are identified by many religious groups as those outside of its particular religious boundaries. Some religious groups and its teachers do admit that some who are saved (from the eternal torture of divine wrath) may be outside its organization. But the fact remains that virtually all religions who teach a hell of eternal torture believe that the best chance for eternal safety lies within its denominational walls.

I reject a hardheaded, hardheart-

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ed God of wrath who condemns all those outside of the strict confines of religious borders. Religious dogmatism that insists on eternal damnation seems to be nothing more than a vindication of a human sense of justice. Thus, assuming God to be like ourselves, we can find ourselves dutifully employed as religious travel agents offering one-way trips to an eternity of torture—assigning places in hell for those who offend our religious traditions and teachings.

### Does Grace Quench the Eternal Fires of Hell?

One of the great gospel objections to the hottest kind of eternal, never-ending torture hell lies within the central emphasis of the gospel. Religion depicts “get out of hell free” cards being awarded on the basis of human works. A preoccupation with hell inevitably drives humans to be self-absorbed. We can start living our lives trying to stay out of hell, living by arbitrary lists of things we ought to do and ought not to do. As we live those lives, we just can’t help but notice that others are not trying as hard as we are—and in order to sleep at night we volunteer to help God by making reservations for other people in a hell of eternal torture.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis invites us on a bus with ghosts who have made an excursion from hell to heaven, hoping to take up permanent residency in heaven. They meet citizens of heaven, those whom Lewis calls “the solid people.” One large ghost is astonished to find in heaven a man who, on earth, was tried and executed for murder.

The ghost asks, “What I’d like to understand is what you’re here



WHEN BIBLICAL LITERALISM  
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for...you, a bloody murderer, while I’ve been walking the streets down there and living in a place like a pigsty all these years.”

The solid person tries to explain that the man he murdered as well as himself both found themselves reconciled at the throne of God. But the ghost just can’t accept that explanation. His sense of justice is violated. The injustice of the solid person being a resident of heaven and him being doomed to hell overwhelms him.

He yells at the solid person, demanding his rights. “I’m asking for nothing but my rights.... I got to have my rights same as you, see?”

This is the very point to which Lewis wants us to come. He has the solid person respond, “I haven’t got my rights, or I should not be here. You will not get yours either. You’ll get something far better.” (*The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis, HarperCollins, San Francisco, pages 26, 28).

### The Biblical Evidence—Literal or Metaphor?

The hottest-and-longest-kind-of-hell-possible advocates depend on literal interpretations of all biblical passages that speak of hell. In the 14th century Dante Alighieri imagined hell, in his *Divine Comedy*, as a place of terror and torture (see “An



IMAGE BY HAMIDREZA AHMADI AND MARY WEGNER—PTM

WHY WOULD WE PRESUME TO THINK THAT GOD WOULD REWARD 80 YEARS OF EVIL WITH AN ETERNITY OF TORTURE?

Open Letter to Dante” September-October, 2004 *Plain Truth*). Dante’s hell was a place of sadistic torture, where the wicked writhe in never-ending pain, boiling in blood, while their screams echo across eternity.

Some of the early church fathers believed that the saved, in heaven, could witness, in real time, the torture and torment of the lost. In a similar vein there are contemporary authors and preachers today who theorize that God is present in hell to forever witness his justice being vindicated. Some within Christendom actually teach that the sight of family members and loved ones in hell will not trouble those in heaven, but in fact their sense of eternal bliss will be heightened by knowing that God’s justice prevails, and their concern for their earthly loved ones who are being eternally tortured will pale into insignificance by comparison.

When biblical literalism (combined with a corrupted sense of justice) runs amok, preposterous ideas prevail. I cannot imagine how those who enter God’s kingdom of heaven by his grace could ever delight in the torture of anyone—let alone their own loved ones! But then I believe in a God who never stops loving us. I also believe that there are many word pictures and metaphors in the Bible, and that while they are inspired by God, God intended humans to read them as he inspired them.

God did not inspire the use of metaphors and poetry hoping we would butcher their meaning by taking them literally.

I believe that literal interpretations of metaphorical and poetic language in the Bible twist and distort the message God has inspired. When it comes to hell, many read the word translated as “fire” and, understanding how fire works in our mortal setting of time and

true. An exclusively literalistic interpretation of biblical language neglects to take into consideration the linguistic forms that God used when inspiring the message and words of the Bible. Many literalists confuse the vehicle that brings the message of truth with the message. In so doing they “strain out a gnat and swallow a camel”—metaphorically speaking, of course! (Matthew 23:24)

For example, when Jesus said, “take the plank out of your own eye” (Matthew 7:5) what he said is true, but it is not literally true. The same principle holds true for many teachings throughout the Bible. When it comes to fire, the actual intended meaning in Scripture is often non-literal. God himself is said to be a “consuming fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24). Many Old Testament passages describe fire around this throne (so fire is and will be an eternal feature of heaven!). The New Testament speaks of Jesus in his glory having eyes like “blazing fire” (Revelation 1:14).

The Gospel of Matthew describes

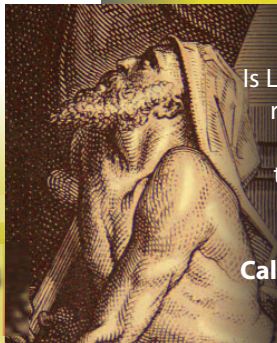
...WE MUST NOT ENTHROPE OR DEIFY ANY PERCEPTION OF HELL, HOWEVER IT MAY SERVICE OUR DESIRE FOR JUSTICE, OVER THE REALITY OF GOD AND HIS NATURE.

space, project that same idea into an eternal setting where physical bodies are never consumed.

Of course, upon reading these words some will immediately accuse me of not believing in the Bible. What they really mean is that because I don’t interpret the Bible as they do, then I do not accept the authority of the Bible. What they really believe is that because I do not subscribe to nor do I promote their hottest-kind-of-hell exactly as they do, I must be on the road to heresy and perdition. But the authority and veracity of the Bible does not rest on an interpretative method that insists on every true statement of the Bible being literally

hell as “darkness” and as “fire”—seemingly contradictory definitions if taken literally. Compare Matthew’s “darkness” of hell (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) with Matthew’s “fire” of hell (Matthew 3:10; 12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40; 42; 50; 18:8-9; 25:41). The short New Testament book of Jude describes hell as fire in verse seven, and then hell as blackest darkness in verse thirteen. Of course, it goes without

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WHILE I DO NOT BELIEVE IN A HELL OF  
ETERNAL TORTURE, NEITHER DO I EMBRACE  
ANNIHILATIONISM. BOTH FAIL TO  
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saying that fire and darkness are polar opposites.

Why, for those who insist on extreme literalism, would eternal torture be a just recompense for a lifetime of sin? Let's be literal. Hypothetically, let's presume an individual who is not merely a "normal" sinner who lies and cheats and steals, but a *really evil* person.

Let's assume this wicked and perverse person gets an early start in a lifetime of depravity so that by the end of their life, he or she will have amassed 80 years of foul and heinous acts. How can eternal punishment be considered divine justice?

If we are attempting to literalize hell, in all of its aspects, then would it not be reasonable to consider such a person as deserving (assuming that God asks us to help define his character and his justice—an assumption that religion seems to encourage) of no more than 80 years of punishment? Why would we presume to think that God would reward 80 years of evil with an eternity of torture?

### Make Up Your Own Mind—Think About It!

It is not within the scope of this brief article to exhaustively examine every biblical text about hell, but to point out that while judgment is clearly taught in the Bible, the specifics of hell's eternal reality are beyond our ability to understand, for God has not clarified them for us. What he seems to have clearly revealed is 1) that he is a God of love, mercy and grace, 2) that he does and will judge between good and evil and 3) that heaven is a place of being eternally in his presence and that hell is a place of eternal separation from him. It seems clear that we must not enthrone or deify any perception of hell, however it may service our desire for justice, over the reality of God and his nature.

We must ask how a hell of eternal torture fits within the gospel of Jesus Christ. What does God's grace have to say about eternal torture? Proponents of eternal torture want us to focus on God's wrath and his divine justice.

All right, think of yourself as a crime scene investigator. As an investigator, consider how eternal torture came to be accepted within Christendom, use the tools of your trade—the teachings of Holy Scripture,

the nature of the one true God and the character of our Lord and Savior revealed to us in the gospel. When compared with the Lamb of God, and his matchless sacrifice for us, do

teachings about eternal torture exhibit the tell tale signs of human finger prints more than the divine hand of God?

As Christ-centered and grace-based followers of the Master, we realize that Jesus is the ultimate standard when considering problematic and conflicting doctrinal teachings. Is Jesus the source and origin of a literal reality of eternal torture—or should we consider some other source? And don't forget, motive is always a factor. What motive might humans have, insisting that those who don't measure up to *their* religious standards, burn eternally, tortured forever and ever?

There are many other considerations you may wish to study and ponder before you decide what you will believe about hell. Whatever you do, don't simply allow some religious authority to tell you what you should believe and how you should think. You might want to study the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated into our English word "hell."

As you do, and as you consider a wide variety of passages, you will want to consider the context within which those words are used. After all, an elementary rule of language is that the meanings of words may vary depending on the context in which they are used. You may wish to read and study the arguments for and against different perspectives that Christians take about the subject of hell. I highly recommend *Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, General Editor, published by Zondervan (1996).

Perhaps we would all be better served to take to heart what God inspired Paul to say, "So don't get ahead of the Master and jump to conclusions with your judgments before all the evidence is in. When he comes, he will bring out in the open and place in evidence all kinds of things we never even dreamed of—inner motives and purposes and prayers. Only

"I WILLINGLY BELIEVE THAT THE DAMPED ARE, IN ONE SENSE, SUCCESSFUL, REBELS TO THE END; THAT THE DOORS OF HELL ARE LOCKED FROM THE INSIDE... THEY ENJOY FOREVER THE HORRIBLE FREEDOM THEY HAVE DEMANDED."

—THE PROBLEM OF PAIN  
C. S. LEWIS

"THERE ARE ONLY TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE IN THE END: THOSE WHO SAY TO GOD, 'THY WILL BE DONE,' AND THOSE TO WHOM GOD SAYS, IN THE END, 'THY WILL BE DONE.' ALL THAT ARE IN HELL, CHOOSE IT. WITHOUT THAT SELF-CHOICE THERE COULD BE NO HELL. NO SOUL THAT SERIOUSLY AND CONSTANTLY DESIRES JOY WILL EVER MISS IT. THOSE WHO SEEK FIND. TO THOSE WHO KNOCK IT IS OPENED."

—THE GREAT DIVORCE,  
C.S. LEWIS

### What Do You Think?

Tell us your take on hell and eternal torture. Do you agree or disagree with Greg Albrecht's assessment? Share your insights, in 100 words or less, by sending them to [managing.editor@ptm.org](mailto:managing.editor@ptm.org) or snail mail us at : Hell  
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