

he asked me...

"Now you are going to tell me how to be who I AM? Just let me define myself. After all, my thoughts aren't your thoughts, and nothing you do can change it. I am immutable. What would you do if you knew that for a fact?"

"First, I would be glad. Then I would get some rest. Then I would tell everyone I know what you're really like. Then I might laugh a little more, be less critical and quit trying to be everyone's mother. I would be kinder and gentler toward myself, too. But then...that wouldn't be very spiritual."

"Of course it wouldn't be spiritual! I'm really quite tired of spiritual people. That was the problem with the scribes and Pharisees. They were spiritual and knew it. The really righteous rarely know it. Others don't either. Doesn't matter. 'Righteousness' is another word for 'freedom'—that comes from being accepted and joyfully living with that knowledge. It's dancing without always looking at your feet."

"Wow, that's a relief!"

"I meant it that way."

I'm not exactly sure what I'm going to say in that sermon series on righteousness. I'm still working on it. But whatever I say, I've decided that I'm not going to tell people to *just try harder*. I'm going to tell them about a God who loves them, and then I'm going to see what happens when they (and I) understand that fact. I suspect that righteousness comes from the "constraint" which finds its root in God's love (2 Corinthians 5:14). And because it is, after all, his love, that means if there is no righteousness, his love is the same. Now... that would be a radical message!

C.S. Lewis once penned a humorous epitaph. It reads:

*Erected by her sorrowing brothers;  
In memory of Martha Clay;  
Here lies one who lived for others;  
Now she has peace. And so have they.*

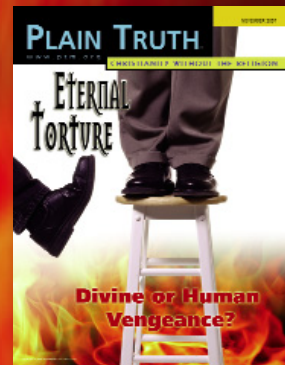
May God save us from the *righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees. And may God save me from my own righteousness when it isn't from him. You too!

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown

MARCH/APRIL 2008

# What our readers say about Hell



In the November 2007 Plain Truth, we invited readers to share their opinions about Greg Albrecht's article, "Eternal Torture—Divine or Human Vengeance?" You might say we received a "hell" of a response! Because we took a moderate (and, we believe, Biblical) position, we received numerous subscription cancellations from those with strong views on both ends of the spectrum (those who believe in everlasting torture as well as those who believe in shortlived punishment—or none at all). In general, it seems that most of our respondents do not believe in never-ending torment, yet most respondents do believe in some form of hell. Of course Plain Truth does not endorse all of these opinions—but we are happy to see that our article has made people think!

In response to your article, yes, hell is real and for anyone not to believe that hell is real, they have seriously misinterpreted the Word of God. Anyone who rejects Jesus Christ, the wrath of God shall be upon him (John 3:36).—Clifford, North Carolina

I am in total agreement with your article. Although I don't attend any church at present I love the Plain Truth articles, as I have come to a place where I must practice Christianity without religion. If Jesus died for our sins then doesn't he have a plan to ultimately deal with them in a loving way? I scratch my head when Christians talk of eternal torture and in the next breath talk about God's grace. I do see judgement, correction and complete destruction of evil. Thanks for a well written and hopeful article.—Gloria, Texas

I agree that retributive justice in the old testament sense of "eye-for-eye" is not what is taught in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus forgave heavy-duty sinners during his ministry on earth. He stated that those forgiven much would love him much, and those forgiven little would love him little. —Fred, Florida

I wholeheartedly disagree with Mr. Albrecht's assessment of hell. I believe Scripture clearly teaches that hell is separation from the love, mercy and grace of God, but also the place where God himself pours out his holy wrath on unredeemed sinners, the unsaved, those who have not been born again by God's marvelous grace. God is there—his omnipresence demands it (many Christians believe God has almost nothing to do with hell, since he is "separated" from it). He is there as the God of wrath & justice. To say one's sins don't merit eternal punishment is taking a rather light view of one's sins, don't you think? The Word explicitly says that eternal condemnation will be everlasting. Please cancel my subscription.—Mark, Missouri

The just recompense for sin is the denial of eternal life; hell involves perishing. The torture doctrine has been prevalent for over 1,600 years. Remarkable!—Kenneth, Kentucky

I believe your premise of specifications, temperature and longevity in the hereafter missed a central truth. The Bible repeatedly says that following our death, we will become spirits that are free from all earthly senses. Therefore, we will not be subjected to pain and suffering. Also, we will have no sense of time which makes longevity a non-factor in eternity. We will all be judged as spirits and the only "condition," if you will, will be a separation from God's love and joy for those whom Christ judges as unworthy.—Skip, Vermont

When we stop teaching a literal application of the Word of God, and start using metaphors, analogies and symbolism, we open the door for heresies. There are some passages that are symbolic—but the passages regarding hell and the Rapture are not among them. As John 3:14-18 states, people condemn themselves to hell because they refuse to believe and trust in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the only means to access heaven. They are not sent to hell because of an evil or corrupt lifestyle. Please cancel my subscription immediately!—Robert, Idaho

My opinion on an eternally burning hell is simple: the Jesus I have met does not torture.—Stephen, Florida

My take on your article—disappointed! All I learned was that there are different views, of which I was already aware. My take is that a loving God is merciful. He will not have a person of his creation tortured forever. A body of flesh ash will burn up.—Earl, Iowa

Hell is a place of nothingness, of unconsciousness, the absence of life. The dead are not conscious. They are void of feelings. Is that a good thing? No—because one does not have life to enjoy. Of course there is no suffering either. If one is condemned to hell, one is condemned to death. No more pain and no more joy. In the end, rejecting God's ways will result in receiving an eternal punishment, rather than being punished eternally.—Sterling, New York

I concur that toxic religion routinely uses hell as leverage for winning supporters, handing out “get out of hell free” cards in return for good works. I have never been convinced that hell is something God had to create in order to manipulate human behavior. I liken the threat of hell, and its consequent focus on torture as a means for behavior modification, to a parent who says to his seven year-old: “Now, I want you to clean your room. And if you refuse to clean your room I am taking you into the basement and throwing you into the furnace. Maybe then, you will learn to clean your room!” I don't know of many parents who'd do that, but we insist that God would.—Pennsylvania

God is merciful, and he is in the salvage business. Hell fire is needed for all of us to know what he does with chaff—unrepented sins. When fuel burns up—the fire goes out. God does not operate a torture chamber in a deep dungeon in his castle or anywhere else.—Nevada

Having just finished your contemplative article on eternal torture, I was immersed in thought of my own 30-plus year journey through Christianity, much of it used and abused by narrow-minded proponents of an eternal fire-and-brimstone hell. Now that I have broken free free of religion, my hope of Heaven and spending eternity with my loving heavenly Father grows sweeter by the day. I believe we are in for a glorious awakening when we truly see God for who he is, and I can't think of anything worse than to be separated from his mercy, grace and loving kindness for an eternity.—Joe, Kansas

I would want hell to not be for eternity, and yet I do not find Scripture offering me that alternative. Instead I believe we underestimate the heinousness of our rebellion against a holy God. Your comment, “Why would we presume to think that God would reward 80 years of evil with an eternity of torture?” supposes that sin is really not that awful and that God is really not gracious. I wonder when if ever will it “be enough” for all the wickedness that Hitler, Stalin, Mao and untold others have committed against God and humanity through the millennia of time?—Alberta, Canada

The wicked are eternally separated from God but only after death—by fire in a physical body. The wicked shall be burned up, leaving neither “root nor branch” (Malichi 4:1). Hell is not eternal, but the effects of hell are eternal.—Gene, Tennessee

Jesus preached more on hell than he did on heaven, because he knew what was ahead for unbelievers. God does not send people to hell—they go by their own choosing. To say that hell is a temporary punishment is to call Jesus Christ a liar. In Matthew 25:31-46 when Jesus shall judge the sheep on his right and the goats on his left, those on his left shall go into everlasting punishment, not temporal, but everlasting punishment.—Franklin, California

How sad it is that many churches scare people into giving their lives to God only to avoid hell, rather than because they want a relationship with God. They preach only hell instead of preaching the mercy, grace and love of God. Any sin is forgivable. What about the poor souls who've been misled by organized religions? I can't imagine God casting them into hell.—Karen, Email

In your article on hell you didn't properly explain annihilationism. Most annihilationists are conditionalists—they believe that the unsaved are tormented in hell in proportion to their individual sin and guilt and then are consumed by the fires of hell. Everyone will not be “nuked” equally. But the Bible consistently uses the words “destroy, destruction, perish, consume, burnt up, death and ashes” to describe the fate of the ungodly. Only twice does John use the word torment, and that is in the highly symbolic book of Revelation. God will not torture the unsaved in fire forever, like a sadist.—Garrett, Virginia

One of the biggest problems with the debate on eternal destiny is the assumption of innate immortality. We read in Genesis 3:22-23 “...and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever; Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden.” Our hope as saved Christians is “living forever,” as John 3:16 states “...whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” To me, immortality, eternal life, living forever are gifts to the redeemed believers.—Robin, California