

Views of the Afterlife for Non-Believers

Bradley Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem* (pp. 4-5)

Infernalism

Many or even most Christians across the church spectrum are still convinced that to be a good, Bible-believing Christian, they must accept a hell of eternal, conscious torment. They may secretly repress doubts or privately concede to skepticism, but they still believe that the Bible teaches infernalism only. Infernalists range in opinion from belief in hell as a literal place with actual flames to a spiritual state of anguish of the soul. They are taught to presume that hell must be populated by the damned: those who refused salvation during their lifespan. After all, they reason, how else can one interpret key texts like Matt 25: 31–46 (the goats who go into eternal punishment), Luke 16: 19–31 (the rich man who is in inescapable “agony in this fire”), and the “lake of burning sulfur where the smoke of torment rises forever and ever” (Rev 14, 20, 21)? This view of hell leads to evangelical fervor, a desire to see as few people as possible condemned to such a terrible place.

Annihilationism

Others teach that “perishing” (John 3: 16) is synonymous with death or eradication, rendering a full stop to the existence of the unredeemed. Some annihilationists believe that death itself is the end and that only those prepared for everlasting life will experience the resurrection (“conditional immortality”). Others believe that the wicked will be raised to life again, judged for their deeds, and then damned to the lake of fire, where they are completely consumed. Rather than being supernaturally sustained to endure endless torture, “both body and soul are destroyed” (Matt 10: 28) in a “second death” (Rev 21: 8), which vaporizes the whole person (Ps 37) to ashes (Mal 4). The annihilationist sees justice done justly, with spiritual capital punishment performed quickly and compassionately. Any weeping, wailing, or gnashing of teeth refers to the grief over receiving one’s sentence, not some ongoing, agonized state of consciousness.

Universalism

A breadth of other views find shelter under the umbrella term “universalism.” Many modern universalists believe that hell doesn’t exist and that everyone goes to heaven—whatever that happens to be. No particular faith is necessary, and not even the most heinous crimes can disqualify anyone from Paradise. After all, in God’s indiscriminate grace, “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt 5: 45). At the opposite end of the universalist continuum is the doctrine of “ultimate redemption.” Ancients like Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa are often labeled “universalists,” but they certainly believed in the existence of a lake or river of fire and insisted that many must pass through it. But for them, the cleansing fire would be curative chastisement that prepares one for God’s presence. In fact, the fire might even be God’s presence. Therefore, hell would eventually be empty or its refining purpose would come to an end.

Biblical Terms Associated with Hell and Judgment	
Words traditionally translated “hell” in English	Occurrences of Hebrew and Greek words relating to divine judgment
Sheol Deut 32:22; 2 Sam 22:6; Job 11:8; 26:6; Ps 9:17; 16:10; 18:5; 55:15; 86:13; 116:3; 139:8; Prov 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:11; 15:24; 23:14; 27:20; Isa 5:14; 14:9; 14:15; Isa 28:15; 28:18; 57:9; Ezek 31:16, 17, 31:17; 32:21; 32:27; Amos 9:2; Jonah 2:2; Hab 2:5.	Sheol (grave, pit, unseen) Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Num 16:30, 33; Deut 32:22; 1 Sam 2:6; 2 Sam 22:6; 1 Kng 2:6, 9; Job 7:9; 11:8; 14:13; 17:13, 16; 21:13; 24:19; 26:6; Ps 6:5; 9:17; 16:10; 18:5; 30:3; 31:17; 49:14, 14, 15; 55:15; 86:13; 88:3; 89:48; 116:3; 139:8; 141:7; Prov 1:12; 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:11, 24; 23:14; 27:20; 30:16; Eccl 9:10; Song Sol 8:6; Isa 5:14; 14:9, 11, 15; 28:15, 18; 38:10, 18; Isa 57:9; Ezek 31:15, 16, 17; 32:21, 27; Hos 13:14, 14; Amos 9:2; Jonah 2:2; Hab 2:5.
Hades Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14.	Hades (grave, pit, unseen) Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; 1 Cor 15:55; Rev 1:18; Rev 6:8; 20:13, 14.
	Tehom (deep, depths) Gen 1:2; 7:11; 8:2; 49:25; Exod 15:5, 8; Deut 8:7; 33:13; Job 28:14; 38:16, 30; 41:32; Ps 33:7; 36:6; 42:7; 71:20; 77:16; 78:15; 104:6; 106:9; 107:26; 135:6; 148:7; Prov 3:20; 8:24, 27; Isa 51:10; 63:13; Ezek 26:19; 31:4; 31:15; Amos 7:4; Jonah 2:5; Hab 3:10. Abussos (Abyss, bottomless pit) Luke 8:31; Rom 10:7; Rev 9:1, 2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3.
Gehenna Matt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; Jas 3:6.	Ge Hinnom (Valley of Hinnom) Josh 15:8; 18:16; 2 Kgs 23:10; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:6; Neh 11:30; Jer 7:31, 32; 19:2, 19:6; 32:35. Topheth (a place in the Valley of Hinnom) Job 17:6; 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 7:31, 32; 19:6, 11, 12, 13, 14; Isa 30:33. Gehenna (the Valley of Hinnom) Matt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; Jas 3:6.
	Lake of fire / fire / brimstone (sulfur) Gen 19:24; Deut 29:23; Job 18:15; Ps 11:6; Isa 30:33; 34:9; Ezek 38:22; Luke 17:29; Rev 19:17, 18; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8.
Tartarus 2 Pet 2:4.	Tartarus 2 Pet 2:4.

All of these points of view reflect theological concerns for representing God’s character aright, pastoral concerns for guarding and guiding God’s flock in the truth, evangelistic concerns for presenting the Gospel with integrity, and biblical concerns for faithfulness to Christian Scripture. So how is it that we’ve come to such differing positions?

“Rather than painting themselves into universalist or infernalist corners, a great many of the Church Fathers and early Christians found refuge in the humility of hope. They maintained the possibility (not the presumption) of some version of judgment and hell and the twin possibility (not presumption) that at the end of the day, no one need suffer it forever. For several centuries, scholars and mystics engaged in experimental theology, warning that none should presume upon universal redemption because of the possibility of damnation and that none should presume upon hell for anyone else other than perhaps oneself. For them, peace came not from certainty of knowing how it would all pan out but from a solid hope in God’s great love and mercy— that Jesus’ plan to save the whole world might actually work.”
Bradley Jersak