

Will Sinners Burn Forever?

by David Emerson Root, Jr.

Question:

“Will sinners burn in hell forever or will they be totally annihilated in the lake of fire?”

Answer:

In order to answer this question, first let's define some terms. When we talk about what will happen to “sinners,” we're referring to people who don't have faith in Jesus as their Savior. For example, when Christians share the Gospel with an unsaved person, they usually ask the unsaved person to say a “*sinner's* prayer.” So even though Christians commit sins, we tend to use the term “sinners” to refer to people who are unsaved. In addition, my article called [Did Jesus Go to Hell after He Died?](#) explains why the *Lake of Fire* (Revelation 19:20, 20:10, 14-15, 21:8) is the best definition for the English word “hell.”

Now, there are three main views about what will happen to unsaved people:

- The “**Annihilation**” view says that unsaved people will spend an unknown amount of time in conscious torment in the Lake of Fire, and then they will be completely annihilated (with no more conscious existence).
- The “**Eternal Torment**” view says that unsaved people will spend all of eternity in conscious torment in the Lake of Fire.
- The “**Universal Salvation**” view says that unsaved people will spend an unknown amount of time in conscious torment in the Lake of Fire, and then they will eventually receive salvation.

In the next three sections we'll look at some of the evidence that people use for each of these views.

Annihilation

When Christians believe that all unsaved people will be annihilated in hell, one reason is because those Christians say that they can't imagine how a merciful, loving God could torment the vast majority of humanity for all eternity. They ask, is that really justice?

Sometimes people who hold this view point out that eternal conscious torment seems to contradict the phrase, “the second death”:

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by *the second death.*” (Revelation 2:11)

“Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. *The second death* has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.” (Revelation 20:6)

“Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. *The lake of fire is the second death.*” (Revelation 20:14)

“But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-- *their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.*” (Revelation 21:8)

The argument here is that death is the end of life. Physical death is the end of physical life, so the phrase “the *second* death” probably refers to the end of spiritual life.

Another argument people use is that hell is described as a place of *destruction*, which seems to imply total annihilation rather than eternal conscious torment:

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to *destruction*, and many enter through it.” (Matthew 7:13)

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can *destroy both soul and body in hell.*” (Matthew 10:28)

“They will be punished with everlasting *destruction* and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9)

Since hell is described as a place of destruction, the argument is that this implies that unsaved people will be totally annihilated.

Another argument they make is that eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46) does not necessarily mean eternal punishing, and that eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:2) does not necessarily mean eternal judging:

“Then they will go away to *eternal punishment*, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46)

“instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and *eternal judgment.*” (Hebrews 6:2)

The argument here is that the phrase “eternal judgment” can mean a judgment which has eternal consequences (i.e. annihilation). Those who hold this view point out that Jesus secured eternal redemption for us, but it was a once and for all action, meaning that He does not continue the act of redemption eternally:

“He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place *once for all* by his own blood, having obtained *eternal redemption.*” (Hebrews 9:12)

Another argument they make is that the phrase, “the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever” in Revelation 14:9-11 does not necessarily mean that people are tormented in conscious agony forever:

“A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. **He will be tormented with burning sulfur** in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. **And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever.** There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” (Revelation 14:9-11)

The argument here is that since this passage says that the “smoke” of their torment rises forever, perhaps it’s the smoke which is eternal, not the torment. Those who hold this view point out that a similar phrase is used in Isaiah 34:8-10:

“For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause. **Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur; her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever.** From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again.” (Isaiah 34:8-10)

Those who believe that unsaved people will be annihilated in hell say that if we visit Edom (in Southern Jordan) we will not see literal smoke rising eternally from it. The destruction of Edom had eternal consequences, but it’s not burning eternally. For people who hold this view, this indicates that the smoke is meant to be symbolic, and therefore the phrase, “the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever” in Revelation 14:9-11 (above) is probably symbolic as well.

Eternal Torment

When Christians believe that unsaved people will be tormented in hell (the Lake of Fire) for all eternity, one argument they make is that the Bible *specifically* describes people being tormented in the Lake of Fire for ever and ever:

“And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into **the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown.** They will be **tormented day and night for ever and ever.**” (Revelation 20:10)

“A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be **tormented with burning sulfur** in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. **And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.**” (Revelation 14:9-11)

The argument here is that since the Bible *specifically* describes unsaved people being tormented for eternity in the Lake of Fire, this indicates that *all* unsaved people will be tormented for eternity because all unsaved people will be cast into that *same* Lake of Fire:

“If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Revelation 20:15)

According to those who hold this view, the most natural and reasonable conclusion is that *all* unsaved people will suffer conscious agony in hell for all eternity.

Another argument they make is that several Old Testament passages describe the eternal fire of hell in a way which demonstrates the Jewish view that hell is a place of everlasting burning, and that Jesus also expressed this view:

“The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; *both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire.*” (Isaiah 1:31)

“The unsaved people in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: “Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? *Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?*”” (Isaiah 33:14)

“And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; *their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched*, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.” (Isaiah 66:24)

“[Jesus is speaking] If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands *to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.* ... And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be *thrown into hell, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’*” (Mark 9:43-48)

Those who hold this view argue that the reason why the worm does not die and the fire does not go out is because unsaved people will continue to exist forever in agony, so the worm has “food” to eat forever and the fire has fuel to consume forever.

Another argument they make is that Jesus described hell as a fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, and He also described it as a place of darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth:

“They will *throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*” (Matthew 13:42)

“This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and *throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*” (Matthew 13:49-50)

“But the subjects of the kingdom will be *thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*” (Matthew 8:12)

“Then the king told the attendants, “Tie him hand and foot, and *throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”” (Matthew 22:13)

“And *throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”” (Matthew 25:30)

Jude tells us that this “blackest darkness” has been reserved for certain wicked people forever:

“They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, *for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.*” (Jude 1:13)

The argument is that since this blackest darkness has been “reserved forever,” this emphasizes the eternal nature of the punishment which unsaved people will receive.

Those who hold this view also point out that Jesus made a direct comparison between the eternal nature of life (for Christians) and the eternal nature of punishment (for unsaved people):

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the *eternal [aionios] fire* prepared for the devil and his angels. ... Then they will go away to *eternal [aionios] punishment*, but the righteous to *eternal [aionios] life.*” (Matthew 25:41,46)

The argument here is that in each case, the word “eternal” is translated from the *same* Greek word *aionios*. The fire is “eternal” (*aionios*), and the punishment is “eternal” (*aionios*), and the life is “eternal” (*aionios*). For those who hold this view, the implication is that a Christian’s life will go on forever, and the fires of hell will go on forever, and unsaved people’s punishment will go on forever.

Another argument they make is that the Lake of Fire is never described as being temporary. Instead, the *eternal* nature of the Lake of Fire is constantly stressed throughout Scripture:

“The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; *both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire.*” (Isaiah 1:31)

“The unsaved people in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: “Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? *Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?*”” (Isaiah 33:14)

“And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; *their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched*, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.” (Isaiah 66:24)

“His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and *burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*” (Matthew 3:12)

“If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be *thrown into eternal fire.*” (Matthew 18:8)

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the *eternal fire* prepared for the devil and his angels.’” (Matthew 25:41)

“Then they will go away to *eternal punishment*, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46)

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands *to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.* ... And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be *thrown into hell, where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”*” (Mark 9:43-48)

“His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will *burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*” (Luke 3:17)

“They will be punished with *everlasting destruction* and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9)

“instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and *eternal judgment.*” (Hebrews 6:2)

“In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who *suffer the punishment of eternal fire.*” (Jude 1:7)

“They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, *for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.*” (Jude 1:13)

“He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. *And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night* for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” (Revelation 14:10-11)

“And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. *They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*” (Revelation 20:10)

According to this argument, the purpose of hell is for the punishment of unsaved people, so if the fires of hell never go out then it must mean that the punishment of unsaved people will never end. Those who make this argument say that if unsaved people were all annihilated in hell (or if they all eventually receive salvation) then at some point the fire would no longer be needed and would burn out, yet hell is never described as being temporary.

Universal Salvation

When people hold the view that *everyone* will eventually receive salvation, one argument they make is that salvation is meant to be for *everyone*, as in these examples:

“*All* the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and *all* the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. *All* the rich of the earth will feast and worship; *all* who go down to the dust will kneel before him-- those who cannot keep themselves alive.” (Psalms 22:27-29)

“O you who hear prayer, to you *all* men will come.” (Psalms 65:2)

“Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. *All* the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name.” Selah” (Psalms 66:3-4)

“*All* the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name.” (Psalms 86:9)

“You open your hand and satisfy the desires of *every* living thing.” (Psalms 145:16)

“My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of *the world* learn righteousness.” (Isaiah 26:9)

“And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and *all* mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:5)

“The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and *all* the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.” (Isaiah 52:10)

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on *all people*. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.” (Joel 2:28)

“The true light that gives light *to every man* was coming into the world.” (John 1:9)

“For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life *to the world*.” (John 6:33)

“But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all men* to myself.” (John 12:32)

“As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. *For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it*.” (John 12:47)

“Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life *for all men*.” (Romans 5:18)

“For as in Adam all die, so in Christ *all* will be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:22)

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for *all*, and therefore *all* died.” (2 Corinthians 5:14)

“that God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:19)

“to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-- *to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*” (Ephesians 1:10)

“that *at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Philippians 2:10-11)

“and through him *to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*” (Colossians 1:20)

“This is good, and pleases God our Savior, *who wants all men to be saved* and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom *for all men*--the testimony given in its proper time.” (1 Timothy 2:3-6)

“(and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, *who is the Savior of all men*, and especially of those who believe.” (1 Timothy 4:10)

“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death *for everyone.*” (Hebrews 2:9)

“No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will *all* know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” (Hebrews 8:11)

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*” (2 Peter 3:9)

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also *for the sins of the whole world.*” (1 John 2:2)

“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be *the Savior of the world.*” (1 John 4:14)

“Then I heard *every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them*, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”” (Revelation 5:13)

“Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. *All* nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”
(Revelation 15:4)

The argument here is that Jesus came to save the whole world, not just a part of it. If He succeeded in His mission then He could rightfully be called the Savior of the world. If He failed in His mission, then He could not claim to be the Savior of the world and He could not be the Messiah because He would have failed in the mission of the Messiah.

Another argument they make is that it's not justice if the punishment (e.g. eternal torment) is the same for everyone, regardless of the number of sins that people committed or how bad those sins were. They also raise questions such as: Is infinite punishment for finite crimes really just? If God wants to save everyone, but He can't, then is He infinite in power? If God can save everyone, but He won't, then is He infinite in goodness?

People who hold this view also argue that when Jesus spoke about Gehenna and about a worm never dying and about unquenchable fire, the Old Testament had never used such language for anything except a national judgment. The argument here is that the first-century Jews would not have interpreted these statements as meaning eternal punishment. They also argue that the Greek word *aion* (which is often translated in the Bible as “ever” in “for ever and ever”) does not carry the meaning of eternity.

Another argument they make is that since God wants everyone to be saved, and since He sent Jesus to die for everyone, and since God is sovereign, therefore everyone will eventually receive salvation.

A Different Perspective

The above three sections contain the main arguments that I've been able to find for each of these views, and you can probably find more arguments if you search the Internet. It's likely that you don't agree with some of the arguments presented above, and I don't agree with some of them either.

This article was originally written around 1997, and it taught one of the above views concerning the fate of unsaved people. Over the years I have wanted to revisit this subject and study it in more depth and detail, but the Lord has never released me to do this until now. However, He has taken the article in a different direction than I expected. I thought that He was going to show me which view to support, and why, but instead He gave me a different perspective.

Consider the following verse, in several Bible translations:

“And the smoke of their torment rises *for ever and ever*. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.”
(Revelation 14:11, NIV)

“And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up *for ever and ever*: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.” (Revelation 14:11, KJV)

“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 14:11, NASB)

“and the smoke of their torment goeth up *for ever and ever*; and they have no rest day and night, they that worship the beast and his image, and whoso receiveth the mark of his name.” (Revelation 14:11, ASV)

“and the smoke of their torment doth go up *to ages of ages*; and they have no rest day and night, who are bowing before the beast and his image, also if any doth receive the mark of his name.” (Revelation 14:11, YLT)

“And the smoke of their torment goes up *to ages of ages*, and they have no respite day and night who do homage to the beast and to its image, and if any one receive the mark of its name.” (Revelation 14:11, DBY)

“Smoke from their torment will rise *age after age*. No respite for those who worship the Beast and its image, who take the mark of its name.” (Revelation 14:11, Message)

“And the smoke of their torment goes up *until the Ages of the Ages*; and the worshipers of the Wild Beast and his statue have no rest day or night, nor has any one who receives the mark of his name.” (Revelation 14:11, WNT)

Some Christians say that the people in the above verse will be tormented day and night for all eternity (“for ever and ever”), and other Christians say that these people will be tormented day and night for a limited period of time (“for ages and ages”). If this is meant to be a limited period of time, it’s still a very *long* period of time. For example, notice that one week doesn’t really capture the spirit of “ages and ages,” and one year doesn’t really capture the spirit of “ages and ages,” and even one hundred years might not capture the spirit of “ages and ages.”

Perhaps one thousand years, or thousands and thousands of years, adequately captures the spirit of “ages and ages.” So if the people in the above verse will not be tormented for all eternity, but instead they will be tormented for ages and ages (i.e. for a limited period of time), this is still a very *long* period of time. As one Universal Salvation article puts it, “Ages of ages is an intense expression of long duration.”

Now, some Christians have concerns about describing the *Annihilation* view to unsaved people because many atheists are already quite comfortable with the idea of being annihilated after death. For this reason, the Annihilation view might not help atheists come to Jesus. Other Christians have concerns about describing the *Eternal Torment* view to unsaved people because many unsaved people find it difficult to reconcile eternal torment with the idea of a

loving and merciful God. In addition, there's a concern that unsaved people will view the punishment for sin (eternal torment) as being totally out of balance with the crimes that they committed against God. Therefore, the concern is that the Eternal Torment view might turn unsaved people away from God. Other Christians have concerns about describing the *Universal Salvation* view to unsaved people because unsaved people might not feel any incentive to put their faith in Jesus if they're going to be in heaven eventually anyway. The concern is that this will have devastating consequences if the Universal Salvation view is wrong.

As I was talking to the Lord about which view I should believe and teach, He gave me a different perspective instead of telling me which view to believe and teach. He showed me that according to all of the above views, every unsaved person will be punished in conscious torment in the Lake of Fire day and night for some period of time (either for all eternity or else "for ages and ages," because no other length of time is mentioned in relation to the Lake of Fire).

Now, imagine if we tell unsaved people that the punishment for rejecting Jesus as their Savior is to be tormented day and night in a lake of fire, possibly for thousands and thousands of years. We can tell them that some Christians believe that all unsaved people will eventually be annihilated, and some Christians believe that the punishment will last for all eternity, and some Christians believe that all unsaved people will eventually put their faith in Jesus and be freed from their torments. By saying all of this, we have accomplished at least four things:

1. We have warned them about hell (the Lake of Fire) in an honest and accurate way.
2. We have admitted that we don't know everything, which unsaved people tend to appreciate.
3. We have avoided some conflict between Christians (which creates a bad impression for unsaved people) because we're not teaching that one view is right and the others are wrong.
4. We have addressed all of the concerns that Christians have about the different views because we're not teaching a specific view.

Whichever view is correct, that view is God's glorious truth because *all* of God's truths are glorious. What these three views all have in common is the horrifying prospect of continuous conscious torment in the Lake of Fire for a very, very long time.

Conclusion

Bickering and arguing over the fate of unsaved people causes unScriptural divisions between Christians, but it's completely unnecessary for the reasons described in this article.

All for Your glory, Lord Jesus!

Source: <http://www.layhands.com/WillSinnersBurnForever.htm>