

## For Further Discussion – The Doctrines of Hell

*Curious Friends and Truth Seekers!*

This is Pastor Peter. In my recent message on Hell, I mentioned that I had written a more lengthy and academic discussion on Hell. Years ago, many people asked me about Rob Bell’s wildly popular best seller, “Love Wins” which makes numerous claims on Hell. So, with both of these topics in mind, I’m excited to introduce an essay I wrote quite a while back excerpted from a non-published book called “*Insulting the Spirit of Grace.*”

To give you a little context, I wrote this book for a few friends about 20 years ago. Many of them were investigating a doctrine called Universalism, a cultic approach to Christianity that denies any existence of Hell. It claims that all people are automatically saved and that everyone will automatically go to heaven. It also claims that “Hell” was the clever invention of medieval clerics and had no place in the early church.

Naturally, the vast majority of Christian scholars see this doctrine quite differently than universalism. So, I wrote this as an apologetic response to the more common cult-group arguments.

Obviously, this is not anywhere close to the comedy writing style I usually use (like in *Pharisectomy* or *Broken Escalators*). And if you have a specific question, feel free to scroll down through the sub-titles to find answers.

*Blessings!*

*Pastor Peter*

*P.s. I didn’t write this well... and you’ll probably see a lot of spelling errors too!!!!*

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# What Does the Bible Really Teach About Hell?

“The senseless man does not know,  
fools do not understand,  
that though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish,  
they will be *forever* destroyed.”

**Psalm 92:6**

“Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity,  
not laying again the foundation of repentance...and **eternal judgment.**”

**Hebrews 6:12**

## P

People are definitely more interested in the doctrines of hell after Rob Bell's book "Love Wins" hit the shelves. Honestly, I've always been fascinated by the doctrines of reprobation. After all, if you want to be sure about two topics, the doctrines of hell and salvation seem a prudent place to start!

Keep in mind, thirteen years ago, I was quite obsessive about studying this. As a young senior pastor, I had numerous people in our church who were saying "hell doesn't exist in scripture." Of course, this is a rather dangerous doctrine to get wrong. And it seemed like a small war was breaking out in a church that already lacked unity. In some ways, I over-reacted by writing a 170 page treatise on the doctrines of hell. (The truth was: I liked to research theology). And during that period, I probably read a hundred books on the subject. So, you could imagine that, when Rob Bell's *Love Wins* hit the shelves, I was rather curious to hear what he said.

For a season, it seemed like everyone was hating on Rob Bell – even before *Love Wins*. At first, I thought it was simply because he pushes the envelope. And, as a person who gets a lot of random hate mail, my first thought was, "leave the poor guy alone."

For example, I once had an entire hate-podcast devoted against me. The hater literally said: "*Pastor Peter Haas doesn't even believe in music in church!!*" (A claim that is obviously ridiculous). Even worse, other people started quoting this man's misinformation. (That's half of the problem with the internet.) Pretty soon, people were writing me all sorts of bizarre letters based on bad information: "*Why don't you believe in music!? ...How come you disagree with Communion!?*" (claims that are simply ridiculous). Throughout the process, I realized that there are some irrationally screwed up and fearful people who will hate you – and will never even bother to check their facts. And even when we're right, "*wisdom from heaven is... peaceloving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit...*" (James 3:17). But a lot of Christians don't read *those* scriptures. So, when it came to *Love Wins*, I thought it was just another excuse for the haters to rise up. Unfortunately, when I read *Love Wins*, Bell gave them a lot of good fodder. Unfortunately, there were a good number of statements that simply aren't sustainable.

Don't get me wrong: I actually *like* Rob Bell. I think his heart is in the right place. And I totally agree with him that many people have been abused with the doctrines of hell. At the same time, I'd hate for people to be confused by clever sounding arguments about greek words and decontextualized Early Church Fathers. In the end, I could be completely misinterpreting Bell's arguments too. So, I hope everyone gets a spirit of humility throughout this document. The last thing the body of Christ needs is another person stirring up stupid fights.

So, in a nutshell, here were my main problems with *Love Wins* that I will expand upon below. (1). Bell made it sound like there were an incredibly small number of Bible verses on Hell (& he claimed to quote "all" of them); but there are dozen of texts that he never referenced; (2). He made Greek and Hebrew arguments that simply don't fully jive with the breadth of lexicography. (3). He made it sound like many of the Early Church Fathers didn't really believe in hell; (or, at least, believed that hell is temporary.) But as an avid reader of the Anti-Nicene Fathers, I just didn't feel like his characterizations were accurate. In many ways, it seemed like he borrowed many of his arguments from the Jehovah's Witnesses playbook. So, it didn't surprise me that so many people objected to his scholarship.

So, with all this in mind, allow me to hit these three topics below.

### *(1). Are there an incredibly small number of Bible verses on Hell?*

In *Love Wins*, Bell lists the verses with the word "Hell" in it. And then he claims that all of what we know about hell comes from this small number of verses. But this isn't even remotely true because, many of the verses forming the doctrines of hell do not have the word "hell" in them.

In other words, imagine doing a Bible study on the single word "God" and then saying: "This is everything we know in the Bible about God." We all know that there are dozens of other words for "God." He has many names. And so does Hell. If someone wanted to do a decent study on hell, you would have to look at many names and expressions such as: *grave, lake of fire, eternal judgement, fire, flame, destruction, blackest darkness, everlasting torment, damnation, Lucifer, Gehenna, punishment, wrath, forever, etc.*

For example: The following verse may not have the word "hell" but it's hard to imagine it to be talking about something else:

**2 Thess. 1:8-9** [Jesus] will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power

Or consider Matthew's depiction:

**Matthew 25:46** <sup>46</sup>"Then [on the day of judgement] they [the cursed] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Bell also made it seem like Hell may not be *eternal*. But the following list just doesn't seem to suggest that:

**Hebrews 6:12** <sup>1</sup>Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of

repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, <sup>2</sup>instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and **eternal judgment**. (NIV)

**Isaiah 33:14** <sup>14</sup> The sinners 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**?" (NIV)

**Matthew 25:46** <sup>46</sup> "Then [on day of judgement] the [cursed] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (NIV)  
- **Note: the same Greek word for eternal in "eternal life" is same as "eternal punishment"**

**2 Thessalonians 1:8-9** <sup>8</sup> He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will be punished with **everlasting destruction** and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power

**Jude :13** They [men w/a false gospel] are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom **blackest darkness** has been reserved **forever**. (NIV)

**Jude :6-7** "And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home - these he has kept in darkness, bound with **everlasting** chains for judgement on the great day. 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.

**Revelation 14:9-11** <sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> **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." (NIV)

**Dan. 12:2-3** "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake . . . others to shame and **everlasting contempt**"

**Psalms 92:6** "The senseless man does not know, fools do not understand, that though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be **forever destroyed**."

**1 Chronicles 28:9** "...for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you **forever**."

**Galatians 1:8** "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be **eternally condemned!**" *Again, such strong words from a person who supposedly doesn't believe in such a thing.*

**Mark 3:29** "But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will **never** be forgiven; he is guilty of an **eternal sin**."

## *(2). What do the Greek and Hebrew words for Hell, Eternal, etc, really mean?*

After reading the verses above, someone might ask: *But what if the Greek word for "eternal" or "forever" doesn't really mean that? Or what if "hell" simply means "grave." Or, what if the Greek word "Gehenna" really means "the Valley of Hinnom?"* Bell makes many suggestions about these words that simply don't stack up.

### **"Sheol"**

One of my universalist friends claims that "the Old Testament word for hell (a.k.a. *sheol*) simply means "the grave." (Universalists are people who believe *everyone* goes to heaven regardless of their

will). Therefore, many universalists object to any word translated “Hell”. However, from a lexicography stand-point, it's rather hard to argue that *sheol* could *exclusively* mean the grave. Here's why:

First of all, the common Old Testament Hebrew word for *grave* is “*Queber*” (*kee-Bur*). Almost any writer wanting to discuss a “literal grave” where a body is buried, they would have chosen the word *Queber*. In the Old Testament, there was clearly no confusion between the usage and implication of this word. Certainly, on rare occasions *Sheol* was used metaphorically to describe a “hellish” or “Grave-like” scenario; however, it is still impossible to argue that *Sheol* exclusively meant grave, or that ancient Hebrews ever confused the common meaning of *Queber* and *Sheol*. And to demonstrate this, allow me to show you five important contextual comparisons:

1. In O.T. the *'physical body'* never literally goes to *Sheol*  
Yet it goes to *Queber* 37 times:
2. *Sheol* is never clearly located on the face of the earth  
But *Queber* is located 'on the earth' 32 times
3. Man 'never puts another man' into *Sheol*  
But puts man into a *Queber* 33 times  
Implying: Man cannot 'literally place' a man in *Sheol*
4. Man never 'digs' or 'makes' a *Sheol*  
But he makes a *Queber* 6 times  
Implying: can't 'make a place' for a soul
5. Man never speaks of a man 'touching' *Sheol*  
But he touches a *Queber* 6 times

The only exceptions to these comparisons are when the author is clearly using *sheol* in a metaphoric sense or as a simile. In other words, the author is describing “hellish” scenarios such as the modern expression, “*my life is a living hell*”. (I.e., the expression isn't denoting the literal spiritual hell.) For example “...*out of the belly of Sheol I cried...*” *Jonah 2:2*. *Jonah* didn't mean the “literal *Sheol*”. Merely a *sheol*-like scenario (and being in the belly of a big fish classifies as a pretty bad day).

But here's my point: These comparisons demonstrate that the Hebrews had a word that exclusively meant “The Grave” (*Queber*). This was the primary word for referring to physical death, or the location thereof. But *sheol* clearly took on a broader spiritual implication in its context.

For example: Proverbs 23:14 “*Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.*” In this verse we see the author associate “death” (*sheol*) with a clear spiritual implication “save his soul”. A similar “spiritual association” can be found in Psm.16:10, “*You will not leave my soul in sheol...*” These and others like them prove that *sheol* is an expression that dealt with a realm which was not “limited” to the physical. Again, in order to substantiate their extreme claim, Universalists *must argue* the highly improbable claim that *sheol* exclusively means the “physical grave.”

To add to this improbability, let's add the evidence of the Septuagint. Before the time of Christ, the Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament were translated into Greek. The Septuagint was completed in Alexandria around 200 B.C. And this translation is very important because, it gives us keen insights into what ancient Hebrews understood their own Hebrew words to mean. These ancient translators had many Greek words from which they could choose. The words they selected tend to consistently show *how* they interpreted their own Old Testament words. Naturally, they are in a better position to determine the connotative meanings of their Hebrew language than Twentieth Century Jehovah's Witnesses.

In the Septuagint, the word *Sheol* is almost always translated with the word *Hades*. *Hades* would be a horrible word to use if one was attempting to *exclusively* mean “grave”. This is because, if you

survey it's use in most ancient text, Hades almost exclusively carried the notion of life after death. This can be shown contextually in much the same way we evaluated Sheol above. Though *hades* can be used to refer to the grave, it would *also* almost be impossible to argue that Hades *exclusively* denoted the grave and nothing more.

And once again we ask: *Why is this important?* It's important because, it gives us another interpretive key into how early Biblical interpreters understood their own words. Put plainly: these translators (in addition to the original authors) could have easily selected a word that plainly meant “the grave” in Greek, but they did not.

## The Greek Word *Gehenna*

“**Gehenna**” is one of the Greek words for hell. Most evangelical scholars agree that when people die without Christ, they immediately go to *Hades*, which is the “temporary hell”. Then, at the resurrection of the dead, the soul is reunited with the body (to stand judgement); and, after judgement, the reunited soul and body will go to Gehenna (the permanent hell), also known as the Lake of Fire.

Universalists claim that Gehenna was “merely a sad location” outside Jerusalem but not a place for souls. Therefore, Universalists claim Jesus was probably using this as a metaphor for a miserable life. However, this does not make any logical sense.

Don't misunderstand me: Gehenna is indeed etymologically related to the *literal place* called the Valley of Hinnom (Gay-hinnom). The Valley of Hinnom was an awful burning garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. In more ancient times it was the location of an idol (to which they would make constant human sacrifices to false gods). Jesus used this appalling, reeking, constantly burning “physical place” as a mental picture to denote *another place* which was far worse.

In fact, a careful study of this word in the New Testament would reveal that Gehenna seemed to be used synonymously & interchangeably with the concept of “the lake of fire”. But Jesus intimated that he was *not merely* referring to the literal valley of Hinnom. In fact, if we were to apply Universalism's literal '*earthly interpretation*' of this word to its contexts, it would make absolutely no sense in at least half of them.

For example: in Mt.10, as Jesus is sending out his disciples to teach, he prepares them for the persecution they might experience. He charges them to not be afraid or discouraged if anyone rejects them. Jesus' reason was because: “*whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.*” Just previous to this, he says in vs.28, “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 [Gehenna].”

First of all, why would Jesus and his disciples be scared about the literal valley? After all, they are not going to be anywhere near this actual location. So is Jesus merely warning them not to evangelize there? Logically, this would make no sense.

Secondly, Jesus makes it clear that Gehenna is where the soul *and* body are killed, & not merely the body. In other words, the word has a clear ‘spiritual’ implication about it.

And this isn't a “new” interpretation. After all, many Early Church Fathers believed similarly: “*For we believe...that every man will suffer punishment in eternal fire according to the merits of his deed....Sensation remains to all who have ever lived, and eternal punishment is laid up....Gehenna is a place where those who have lived wickedly are to be punished.*” Justin Martyr (circa.160 A.D) (1.168,169).

In other words, Justin Martyr's understanding of Gehenna completely contradicts the Universalistic literal interpretation. He's almost a contemporary of the Apostles, and he views Gehenna not as something "already occurring" but rather something that has yet to occur.

In studying many *contextual uses* of Hades, you will find that this is the place where the soul goes *after* it departs from the body. This would correctly correlate with the word *Sheol* in the O.T. However, remember that *Gehenna* is the place where both the *soul and the body* go. In Revelations 20:11 we witness what is often called the Great White Throne Judgement. We see *Hades* give up the dead [souls] to be judged (along with the physical bodies *Dan12:2*) and thrown body & soul into the "Lake of Fire". And this *Lake of Fire* is considered synonymous with *Gehenna* because of the consistent similitudes routinely referenced within the usage contexts of these words (See *Gehenna* in Mk 9:43).

Thus, as Kittle's Theological dictionary states: "The NT distinguishes between *Hades* and *Gehenna* : a. the former is temporary [like a local jail before judgement day], the latter definitive [like a permanent penitentiary after judgement day] (cf. Mk. 9:43, 48); b. the former is for the soul alone, the latter for the *reunited body and soul* [reunited at judgement day] (Mk. 9:43ff.; Mt. 10:28). *Gehenna* is non-existent as of now (Mt. 25:41). It is manifested as a fiery abyss (Mk. 9:43) *after* the general resurrection. Those who fall victim to divine judgment (Mt. 5:22; 23:33) will be destroyed there with eternal fire. The ungodly are sons of *Gehenna* (Mt. 23:15). They go to it with Satan and the demons (Mt. 25:41; cf. Rev. 19:20; 20:10-11). The threat of *Gehenna* in the NT is used to show the seriousness of sin and to awaken the conscience to fear of the divine anger (Mt. 10:28; 23:33). Even contemptuous words must be avoided (Mt. 5:22); no sacrifice is too costly in the war against sin (Mk. 9:43ff.)."

### **Eternal Hell & the Greek word "Aion"<sup>3</sup>**

Now, onto the Greek word "aion" or "aionios." Many Jehovah's Witnesses claim that these Greek words are incorrectly translated as "eternal" or "everlasting" but instead mean "indefinite period of time" or "a specific age". It claimed that the alleged "accurate" Greek word for *eternal* is *never* found in relation to the punishment of unbelievers. Therefore, all of the dozens of passages referring to "eternal punishment" or "eternal fire" instead probably mean "temporary purifying fires". Thus, universalists can avoid all of these texts as being evidence of an eternal hell.

**Second**, the doctrines of eternal punishment hardly rest upon the two small Greek words: "aion" and "aidios". There are other words and verses that can communicate this same proof. For one example, Hebrew's "Olam":

**Daniel 12:2-3** Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and **everlasting contempt**.  
3 Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

**Isaiah 33:14** The sinners 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?" (NIV)

**Third:** Although there is a element of truth to universalism's claims about "aion" denoting an "Age" or "specific time", it is impossible to make the extreme claim that aion "can never mean 'eternal'".

The writers at CARM.org illustrated this specific abuse in their essay "A Look at the word Aionion":

"For example consider this verse that is speaking about God: "...who alone possesses immortality and dwells in

*unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen* (1 Tim.6:16). The context is obviously dealing with God's eternal nature. The word in Greek for "immortality" is "athanatos." The Greek word for death is "thanatos." The "a" in front of the word is the negator, without, non, etc. It means that God is deathless; hence, immortal. This is an eternal quality of God. Likewise, the verse states that God has eternal dominion. The word for "eternal" is "aionios" which is derived from the Greek root "aion" which means age. But, God is not immortal for only an "age," nor is His dominion temporal. The word "eternal" is absolutely the best way to translate the Greek "aionion" because God is immortal and eternal. Therefore, it would be wrong to translate the verse by stating that God has "aionion" dominion. Rather, He has eternal dominion.

In other words, there are many contexts like this which necessitate the translation "eternal". But remember, Universalists and Jehovah's Witnesses require us to deny all possibility of this translation. Why? Because, if this possibility exists, it creates an immediate mountain of potential evidence against them.

**Fourth:** Even if there were to be some "new revelation" about the Greek word "Aion" that is about to sweep the Greek community, there are some uses of it that still nullify this argumentation. Take for example, **Revelation 14:9-11** <sup>9</sup>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, <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>**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."

So, lets say this "new definition theory" is correct. *Are we to interpret this verse as saying, "And the smoke of their torment will rise from undefined time-periods to other undefined time-periods?"* Clearly, here is a rapid repetition of this word that necessitates the "standard" interpretation of this word. And there are many more examples of this linguistic use in the N.T.

Again, as the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament wrote (about the word "aion"): *a. The concepts of time and eternity merge in the use with prepositions suggesting indefinite time (Lk. 1:70; Acts 3:21; Jn. 9:32; Jude 13). Sometimes the meaning is "from a remote time" (Lk. 1:70; Jn. 9:32—"never"), but sometimes there is a strong hint of eternity (Lk. 1:55; Jn. 6:51). This is especially true of the plural (Mt. 6:13; Lk. 1:33; Rom. 1:25; Heb. 13:8; Jude 25; cf. also with a past reference 1 Cor. 2:7; Col. 1:26; Eph. 3:11). The double formula "for ever and ever" (Heb. 1:8), especially in the plural (in Paul and Revelation; cf. also Heb. 13:21; 1 Pet. 4:11), is designed to stress the concept of eternity, as are constructions like that in Eph. 3:21 ("to all generations for ever and ever").*

### *(3). What did the Early Church Fathers really Believe about Hell?*

Bell suggested that, perhaps God will allow people to choose heaven after death. And, like many universalists Bell quoted Early Church Fathers (disciples from the first 300 years of the church), who gave intellectual assent to the concept.

Truth be told, it's not the concept itself that bothered me as much as the implication that this was some widespread idea. Over the years, I've heard many universalists try to erode the foundations of what the early church fathers really believed. So, I think Bell touched a sore spot for me. : )

Keep in mind: Origen (one of the disciples Bell quoted) said *a lot of things... even crazy things*. So, we could probably find evidence in his writing to substantiate a large number of contradictory things. But, I wish Bell would have *also* quoted the following statement of Origen who said:

***"The apostolic teaching is that*** the soul...after its departure from the world, will be recompensed according to its deserts. It is destined to obtain either an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness (if its actions will have procured this for it) or to be delivered up to **eternal fire and punishments** (if the guilt of its crimes will have brought it down to this)." Origen (c.225, E), 4.240 (emphasis mine)

Over the years, many universalists and Jehovah's Witnesses have claimed that "not one creed of the church" mentioned eternal torment before 500 A.D. And yes, figures like Pope Gregory the first introduced many strange doctrines into the church (such as purgatory). But these ideas simply aren't true.

First of all: one of the oldest creeds in the early church's existence refers to eternal condemnation. At the end of the *Nicene Creed* (not the *Nicene Constantinople Revision* that was a more "popularized revision" made at a later date) it refers to eternal damnation: the "anathematizing" of anyone who disagrees with that creed.

Secondly, the statement that there is "no documented belief" is virtually impossible. There are dozens upon dozens of early Christian writings that endorse eternal damnation. In fact, the evidence seems to show that the *vast majority* of early church fathers believed in eternal damnation.

In fact, allow me to quote at least **17 distinct Early Fathers** who wrote extensively on the subject. And, just to be thorough, I will include Ante-Nicene Fathers of both Eastern and Western schools of thought (many of which lived in diverse locations):

\* "The way of darkness is crooked, and it is full of cursing. It is the way of eternal death with punishment" **Barnabas** (circa 70-130 A.D.), 1.149.

\* "All souls are immortal, even those of the wicked. Yet, it would be better for them if they were not deathless. For they are punished with the endless vengeance of quenchless fire. Since they do not die, it is impossible for them to have an end put to their misery." **Clement of Alexandria** (circa 195A.D.), 2.580 from a fragment in a post-Nicene manuscript.

\* "You should fear what is truly death, which is reserved for those who will be condemned to the eternal fire. It will afflict those who are committed to it even to the end." **Letter to Diognetus** (c. 125-200 A.D). 1.29.

\* "Those who have not known God and do evil are condemned to death. However, those who have known God and have seen His mighty works, but still continue in evil, will be chastised doubly, and will die forever." **Hermas** (c.150A.D.) 2.50

\* "He goes to the everlasting punishment of fire" **Justin Martyr** (c.160 A.D.), 1.166

\* "For we believe...that every man will suffer punishment in eternal fire according to the merits of his deed....Sensation remains to all who have ever lived, and eternal punishment is laid up." *Justin Martyr* (c. 160) 1.168,169.

\* "We who are now easily susceptible to death, will afterwards receive immortality with either enjoyment or with pain." **Tatian** (c.160A.D.), 1.71

\* "He who acts righteously will escape the eternal punishments, and he will be thought worthy of the eternal life from God." **Theophilus** (c.180A.D.) 2.108.

\* "Eternal fire is prepared for sinners. The Lord has plainly declared this, and the rest of the Scriptures demonstrate it."

**Irenaeus (c.180, E/W)**, 1.401.

\* "But the profane, and all who are not true worshippers of God, in like manner will be consigned to the punishment of everlasting fire." **Tertullian (c.197, W)** 3.54.

\* "I am not ignorant that many [pagans], in the consciousness of what they deserve, would prefer to believe that they will become nothing after death. For they would rather be altogether extinguished, rather than to be restored for the purpose of punishment....There is neither limit nor termination of these torments." **Mark Minucius Felix (c. 200, W)** 4.194,195.

\* "Those who eat will receive eternal life and will enjoy the tree of life in Paradise, with Adam and all the righteous. But the souls of the unrighteous meet an untimely expulsion from the presence of God, who will leave them to remain in the flame of torment." **Hippolytus (c.205, W)**, 5.173.

\* "Luxury and the short-lived joys of the world are ruining you. As a result, you will be tormented in Gehenna for all time"

**Commodianus (c.240, W)**, 4.207)

\* "[God] has prepared heaven, but He has also prepared Gehenna. He has prepared places of refreshment, but he has also prepared eternal punishment." **Cyprian (c.250, W)** 5.311

\* "But we define the second death in this manner: It is the suffering of eternal pain. It is the condemnation of souls to eternal punishments to receive their deserts." **Lactantius (c.304-313, W)** 7.61,62.

\* "Do you dare to laugh at us when we speak of Gehenna, and fires that cannot be quenched - into which we have learned that souls are cast....They are cast in, and being annihilated, they pass away vainly in everlasting destruction." **Arnobius (c.305, E)**, 6.439,440

\* "He casts them into everlasting fire, even through they do not cease to direct their entreaties to Him" **Disputation of**

**Archelaus and Manes (c.320, E)** 6.212

These are only a few quotations from a large sum of early teachings.. Many of the above authors wrote extensively on this topic.

In addition to decontextualizing Origen, universalists also like to cite Augustine of Hippo as endorsing a "widespread lack of belief in an eternal hell." But, first of all, there was certainly no widespread unbelief in an eternal hell within the church. Many of the authors above comprised many of the most influential leaders of those times. Their regions & schools of thought were incredibly diverse (both Western and Eastern); and yet, they all unanimously endorsed an eternal hell. Secondly, when one understands the immediate circumstances of Augustine of Hippo (one of the first great adversaries of universalism), his statement becomes much less sensational.

If the true history of *Apokatastasis* (historical universalism) be known, it was clearly a minority belief and was often associated with a branch of Gnostic ethics. After enjoying isolated entertainment by a small handful during the early church era, it nearly died out entirely in Western Europe (with the exception of John Scotus Erigena and some of the lesser-known mystics.). Even in the middle ages, both

Luther and Calvin distinctly rejected universalism.

## ***Conclusion:***

All things considered, I still enjoyed reading *Love Wins*. I think that it's still stimulating reading for people wanting to read scripture through a new filter. What I liked about the book was this:

**(1). I like that people are finally starting to talk about a "free-will" concept of hell.** Certainly, we are venturing into speculation by suggesting that hell may be "locked from the inside." But, there are certainly a good number of scriptures related to this topic that Bible teachers seem to ignore.

**(2). I like that Bell "suggested" his ideas...** instead of putting forth gray ideas as though they were black and white. Don't get me wrong: he also made black and white ideas more gray than they are (which is why I'm writing this); but, overall, I think he's *helped* the national discussion more than hurt it.

**(3). I like that Bell addresses how Bible teachers abuse people with these doctrines.** Many pastors use these doctrines to instill fear. And yes, I believe that it's good to have a healthy fear of the Lord (if you're already a believer). Yet, my Bible says that "*kindness leads people towards repentance*" (Romans 2:4). People do not have the ability to repent until they have an encounter with God's kindness. Indeed, any repentance that doesn't start with God's kindness is *false repentance*.

Christians need to stop trying to "talk people into repentance"... or "scare people" into repentance. Because, even if we can create such false repentance in their hearts, they will never be able to sustain such an anemic walk with God.

Ultimately, the doctrines of hell are the ultimate symbol of God's love. He loves mankind so deeply that he wants to create a boundary we will never forget. If we love our kids, we will be quite dramatic in our efforts to protect them. And in the same way, absolute love requires absolute boundaries.

For some of you, this may not fully resolve your questions about this doctrine; but, I encourage you to check out my video teaching series *This I Believe*, as I will be addressing many questions such as: "*Is hell fair? Is the punishment proportionate to the crime? Did God really give us enough information?*"

In the meantime, you don't have to agree with everything I say. Research the topic for yourself. And whatever you do, grow closer to God through his word. Let's wrestle through our questions together!

## ***A Purely Free-Will Theology of Hell***

Within orthodoxy, there are many views on hell. It has often been said by Universalists that the doctrines of hell are crude and are incapable of reconciling with the rest of the "Good news" with any sophistication. However, I fully disagree with this opinion.

So, in the following section I will present one such elaborate view (certain parts of which rest within "secondary doctrines"). However, at the end, I will "balance" this view with the "basics" of a Biblical hell.

In a consistently Free-will, or *Open* theology of hell, God sends no one to hell. People send themselves there and stay there eternally *by choice*.

*"But why would people do something so foolish?"* Well, I find myself asking the same question

about those who choose to have a drunken hang-over. Consider the drug addict: many people love drugs yet would love freedom from drugs *more*. So what do they do? They check themselves into a drug rehab center. Other people would prefer to keep their drugs even if it costs them their livelihood, family etc.

**Objection:** *“Oh but they really didn’t have a true “choice” for they had physiological & chemical dependancies that removed their choice!”* Or, perhaps God did not really give us a truly “free-will”? Totally untrue.

Ask any drug counselor and they will tell you that although such dependencies exist, the real battle resides in the psychological/emotional dependencies upon drugs. As one counselor told me of all their patients: *“The bottom line is: where there’s a will there’s a way!”* But were these addicts truly dealt a fair “deal of cards”. This makes a great philosophical argument; but, what about a Biblical foundation?

The Bible teaches that we will never be seized with any temptation that is either uncommon, or “beyond our ability to endure” (1 Cor.10:13) God *will never*, nor *has ever* allowed mankind to be totally overtaken by sin. He has promised to *“always provide a way of escape”* so that we can *“stand up under it”* (1 Cor10:13). Meaning *everyone* has the ability to choose to walk away from this drug induced self-torture. They may need a “Higher power” in order to do this. But God, had indeed made such offers of freedom to those who choose to receive that power<sup>4</sup>.

So, here we have a perfect example of ***chosen self-torture*** even though God had a much more heavenly lifestyle set before them. We can minimize our choice in sin through reactive blaming *“I had no choice... She made me do it! He made me do it! My sin nature made me do it”* Yet, God has given us 100% the resources for renewal via the Holy Spirit. So, why does “eternal self-torture” sound so impossible when we see examples of chosen self-torture everywhere?

**Objection:** *“But God didn’t truly give everyone the opportunity to walk free because: Even if the power was available, he did not grant everyone the same ‘opportunity’ or ‘knowledge’. For example, What about those who were born in the wrong place at the wrong time? What if someone was born in a place where there were no Bibles?”*

In response to this, the Bible teaches that the opportunity & knowledge of God’s grace is everywhere. We don’t like to admit it (because we hate taking responsibility for sin).

The Bible teaches that we can *“suppress the truth by [our] wickedness”* (Rom.1:18). Thus, it should not surprise us that Jesus taught *“The pure in heart will see God”* (Mt.5:8), or that *if* we *“Obey [his] commands”* he would *“reveal himself”* to us (Jn.14:21). And more: that *if* we renew our minds, *then* we will be able to *“test and approve his good pleasing and perfect will”* which we cannot otherwise see until renewal takes place (Romans 12:2). Paul had no hesitations for placing this burden of “renewing our minds” upon the people he taught (especially in light of the Holy Spirit’s help.)

Therefore, even though the knowledge and opportunity are everywhere, through *purposeful ignorance* we cannot see it. Allow me to prove this in greater detail both for the ‘knowledge’ and ‘opportunities’ of God.

**Knowledge:** Creation itself demands the necessity of a creator. Ro.1:20-21 teaches us this very truth. Even more Paul claims that we can learn a good deal about God and his character from creation itself.

When reading Ontological theology, one can almost discern all of the Biblical attributes about God without even needing a Bible! In fact history is replete with people groups who walked their way up to the doorstep of salvation simply by observing nature all by itself <sup>5</sup>.

The Bible seems to teach that the revelation of God is *not difficult to receive at all* if one makes *any effort whatsoever* (Mt.7:7; Jn.14:21). And even in “difficult” situations (remote locations where there are no Christians or Bibles), God “*draws near unto all that draw near unto him*” (James 4:8). God also “*gives wisdom to all without finding fault*” (James 1:5), that God is “*abounding in love to all who call on Him*” (Psm 86:5), regardless of location or circumstances.

Cornelius of Acts 10 makes a great Biblical precedent for this. He clearly had very “limited knowledge of God” being a Gentile with no Christians anywhere around him. His knowledge for salvation was clearly limited; yet, he was “God-fearing” & obeyed with the knowledge he had. I.e., he knew that a god existed; but, he knew nothing about Christ and about salvation.

So, God sent an angel telling him to send for the apostle Peter in Joppa (who returned with the full revelation that Cornelius needed). So, even when natural means are obstructed, God reveals himself through supernatural means! I would think that this demonstrates a rather profound initiative on God’s part to reveal his love to a “truly free” creation.

This Cornelius-style revelation has been happening all over the world - even in the unreached people groups. There are books that even catalogue dozens of such occurrences within our own century.

For example: My friend has recently been targeting the unreached people groups of Nepal (through YWAM church planting teams). There was one people group that was so remote, that it took a 6 day journey up into the mountains in order to reach them. They had never heard the name of Jesus ever before. Not long after the missionaries arrived, they discovered that they *already believed* in a God who died for them on a *cross-shaped tree* that enabled them to go to heaven. The stunned missionaries could not understand how they had arrived at such a belief system with no contact from the outside world whatsoever. The people all repeated that two weeks prior, their was a “show across the sky” that the entire village saw. Every night the people came out to watch what sounded like a movie-like presentation of Jesus dying on the cross. Afterwards, they decided that this was God revealing himself to them & that they should obey this vision & believe. I have around a ½ dozen more stories just like this one.

Thus, the knowledge is everywhere. The revelation of God is everywhere before our eyes, and yet, we cannot see it. In fact there is an entire branch of theology that is exclusively devoted towards discerning the attributes of God from creation itself (Cosmological, Ontological & Teleological theology). It’s amazing how much information you can actually determine about God from creation itself! And yet, everyday we think up another excuse like “*Why the God of Arminianism is so unfair!*” Suddenly we can understand the inspired Psalmist when he wrote: “The senseless man does not know, fools do not understand, that though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be forever destroyed” (Psm 92:6). The answer is clearly because: “[we] did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave [us] over to a depraved mind” (Ro.1:28) and therefore “*men are without an excuse*” (Rom.1:20). And not only is the knowledge of God abounding everywhere, but so are the opportunities of his Grace:

## **Opportunities of Grace:**

There are a certain number of “Graces” that God does indeed give to all mankind (Read Acts

14:16-17). These are often called the “common graces” of God. Things such as “*the ministry of creation*” fall under that category. Allow me to explain this “ministry”:

Regardless of whether a person is a Christian or not they are able to experience the joy of nature: *the fulfillment of a sunset, the stress-relieving ministry of a white sandy beach*. This is one example of a common grace that will only be around for a little more time (for some people). Another common grace of God is the law of sowing and reaping (also known as, the law of sin and death). We don’t like to see “sowing and reaping” as a grace - but, it really is a wonderful grace. Galatians 3 and Romans 7 teach us that sowing and reaping leads us to Christ (the Biblical & ongoing function of the law).

Even more, God, in this life, has graced everyone with “break-points”. I.e., *Emotional and Physical limitations to sin*.

For example: The Alcoholic gets so sick of vomiting that they check themselves into a rehab center (Physical Limit). Or, the Alcoholic gets so lonely for his wife & kids (who have left him) that he checks himself in! (Emotional Limitation).

According to Gal.3, these are “wake-up calls” (i.e., school masters & leashes) to lead us to the fullness of the Gospel: the need for a savior.

To put it another way: Breakpoints are the very Grace of God to lead us to greater grace! Everyone has these opportunities in abundance. And if we do not learn from them, God will “give us over” to our sin.

“Giving us over” is a consistent theme of how God handles sin in the N.T. He doesn’t *force us* to reconcile. God doesn’t *force us* to experience redemption (as the God of universalism does). Instead, God “*Gave them over...to sexual impurity...*” (Rom. 1:24); Instead, God “*gave them over to shameful lusts...*” (Ro.1:26). Instead “*he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done*” (Ro.1:28).

And that is what many believe hell truly is: The “Final Giving Over” of men to do everything their sinful hearts desire, yet with no “Limitations” (a grace that we have now).

Therefore, many conclude that Hell is where God *allows the uninhibited consumption of everything our sinful hearts desire*: Infinite drug overdoses with no death! Infinite sex with no love! I.e., it would be just like now (where God would allow us to choose a destructive lifestyle); but, He’d remove all break-points & limitations including time itself.

And that is what many believe God is allowing us to do right now: To temporarily mold our choice for heaven or hell until we are eternalized in those decisions. And then, once we have eternalized ourselves, God will take us to the proper place that we have fixed ourselves in. This is why our actions are so important even though we live by faith in grace. Because our actions are the only true measurement of what we “believe”(1 Jn.3:18-20).

Many orthodox Christians do not believe that when we all stand before God in heaven that we are going to have some “new” revelation of Jesus and his offer of Grace. It is not illogical to think that when Non-Christians see heaven that they will even want to change their path to hell. Why? Because they “stand before God” in a similar way *every single day* and they don’t change their minds. In other words: the perplexity of our existence *could* haunt us every single day. Yet, do we think about that question? The “sense of eternity” is all around us, yet, do we think “knowledge of this eternity to be worthwhile”

(Rom.1:28): more often than not, the answer would be “No”.

It is not illogical to believe that the “revelation” & grace (as well as the opportunities of God) saturate everything we are and everything around us; And yet, we still choose to live otherwise. So, as one person put it: *“If Hell is locked, it’s locked from the inside out! God merely fixed the chasm!”*

In other words, Hell is where God finally stops interfering with the will of man. Hell is where God stops shoving common grace down everyone’s throat. And it doesn’t “mar” his creation; rather, it shows the true brilliance of God’s love: a love that releases people... not *forces them* like decision-less herds of cattle through some arbitrary framework of what a loving God does and doesn’t do. Besides, forced love is not love, but rather a kind of rape. No truly loving being forces himself upon another.

Passages such as Luke 16 (the Rich man & Lazerus) have been used to demonstrate a pure free-will doctrine. Note that although the Rich man was in complete torture, he never once asked to leave that place of torture. Instead he asked that Lazerus might join him in Hell and “cool his tongue” (i.e., give the Rich Man more pleasure without him having to change his position).

C.S. Lewis noted that *“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!”* (The Great Divorce, 69).

Now I certainly realize that many parts of this theology are not overtly taught in scripture. (The reader will note that this view of Hell clearly leans on the free-will side of things.) There are many other thorough theologies of hell that come from a more Calvinistic tradition which I could have also shared.

My convictions about such a Hell are naturally hesitant. I merely present this to demonstrate that there are a great many theologies of Reprobation that holistically answer many of mankind’s deepest questions, yet, are entirely more sustainable from a Biblical standpoint than is that of universalism. But there are a few criteria that I’m absolutely confident about:

## A More Reliable Theology: The Fundamentals of Hell

Here are the criteria upon which the vast majority of theologians agree:

### 1. Hell is Eternal:

**Hebrews 6:12** <sup>1</sup>Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, <sup>2</sup>instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and **eternal judgment**. (NIV)

**Isaiah 33:14** <sup>14</sup> The sinners 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?**" (NIV)

**Matthew 25:46** <sup>46</sup> "Then [on day of judgement] the [cursed] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (NIV)  
- **Note: the same Greek word for eternal in “eternal life” is same as “eternal punishment”**  
- **If we want to believe in eternal life - we must believe in eternal punishment too.**

**2 Thessalonians 1:8-9** <sup>8</sup> He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will be punished with **everlasting destruction** and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power

**Jude :13** They [men w/a false gospel] are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom **blackest darkness**

has been reserved **forever**. (NIV)

**Jude :6-7** “And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home - these he has kept in darkness, bound with **everlasting** chains for judgement on the great day. 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.

**Revelation 14:9-11** <sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> **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." (NIV)

**Dan. 12:2-3** “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake . . . others to shame and **everlasting contempt**”

**Psalms 92:6** “The senseless man does not know, fools do not understand, that though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be **forever destroyed**.”

**1 Chronicles 28:9** “...for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you **forever**.”

**Galatians 1:8** “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be **eternally condemned!**” *Again, such strong words from a person who supposedly doesn't believe in such a thing!*

**Mark 3:29** “*But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will **never** be forgiven; he is guilty of an **eternal sin**.”*

## 2. People in Hell will be fully Conscious

**Mark 9:47-48** 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, 48 where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

- Many Greek Lexicographers render the word “Worm” as meaning “Memory”

**Lk. 16:22-28 Rich Man and Lazerus:** - This story portrays a very potent “conscious” picture of a person in hell. Most scholars & textual critics define this as a “true story”: (note subtitles in newer translations). It has none of the uniform features that the other parables possess (such as nameless characters; noted similes). And even if it was a parable, “All parables always illustrate an eternal truth” (Hell without Hell Dr. Jack Van Impe).

**Rev. 14:9-11** <sup>11</sup> 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." (NIV)

**Dan. 12:2-3** “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth shall “awake”...some to shame & everlasting contempt”  
- you can’t feel shame & contempt when you’re not conscious

### **3. There will be varying degrees of punishment:**

**Ro. 2:5** “...but b/c of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are *storing up wrath against*

*yourself* for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed.

**2 Pet.2:4** ...Tartarus...deepest hell:...**2:13** “They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done.”

**Dan12:2** Talks of the Resurrection of Dead to differing degrees of reward or punishment

**Luke 12:47-48** “That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his

master wants will be beaten with many blows. <sup>48</sup> But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows.”

**Mt.19:30** ...note how this verse indicates a clear ranking: not merely for the good but also for the bad.

The following verse doesn’t directly relate to hell, but shows that there will be a distinct difference in punishment and experience meted out at the day of judgement:

**Matthew 11:22-24**

22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

These are just a few that I have compiled in a short time.

### **To Summarize**

In conclusion, Universalists cannot substantiate virtually any of their claims regarding the doctrines of hell. The broad accusation that hell is a “mythological place” made by mediaeval Christians simply doesn’t hold up – along with their arguments about Greek and Hebrew words. The Orthodox doctrines of hell do not rest upon cultural myths; instead, they rest on the Bible and it’s own internal commentary. The Orthodox doctrines of hell do not rest on singular Greek and Hebrew words, nor on singular passages; instead, they rest upon incredibly well established lexicography that is *consistent & reliable*.

For these reasons and many others, most scholars do not even consider *the universalist or Jehovahs witnesses interpretations of Hell* a worthy theology to be considered. In my opinion, Universalism’s approach to hell simply stems from a bad assumption about God and how his love functions.

