

# BRAZEN CHURCH



## Putting Hell Back In The Handbasket

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## Part 1: A Biblical Staple The Bible Never Even Mentions

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### **Hell is not a Biblical concept.**

Much of the Bible is debatable. Much of the Bible is open to numerous interpretations. There are many theological stances that can be convincingly argued both for AND against.

The modern concept of Hell as a place of eternal conscious torment is not one of them. Today, we are going to look at every mention of “Hell” in the Bible, and we are going to demonstrate this conceptual staple of Western Christianity to be virtually untenable.

But don’t get me wrong... I believe in Hell.

I’ve read extensively about it. I’ve heard first-hand accounts of it. I’ve even caught glimpses of it myself.

As humans, we seem to be fantastic at creating hell. We sow it into our own lives and the lives of others and then watch as it's reaped around the world.

Hell is the terror of the refugee. It's the grief of surviving family members, the despair of the abused spouse, the self-hatred of the neglected child.

But it's also more than that.

Hell is the disillusioned numbness of the soldier. It's the hopelessness of the drug addict. It's the perpetual frustration, anger, and self-loathing of the *abusing* spouse.

Hell can be found everywhere we look. It can be seen in both the eyes of the oppressed and the eyes of the oppressor. Humanity doesn't need to be made aware of Hell. We are all too aware of it already.

### **What we need is good news.**

Fortunately, Jesus came to bring just that. He took human form, experienced the joys and hellish torments of our existence, and introduced us to a benevolent Father. He came to show us the way of life – the path through this hell – and when he left, he announced the arrival of our personal guide, the Holy Spirit, who would help us navigate this path of life.

For awhile after Christ's departure, Christians were carriers of life – evangelists of the Good News. But somewhere along the way, a perverse lie crept into our understanding of God, a lie so horrid, it depicts God as perpetrating evil the Earth's most depraved minds wouldn't even consider.

Today, instead of 2 Billion carriers of the Good News, much of Christendom is preoccupied with prophesying a terror of unimaginable proportions.

Hell: a place where people are consciously tormented for all eternity.

Fortunately for humanity, not only does this place not exist, it can't even be defended in Scripture.

## **The Word “Hell” Isn't Even Found In The Bible**

Well... it might be found in your Bible. Let me elaborate.

### **Most Biblical translations don't contain the word “Hell” even a single time.**

The King James Bible, which is widely considered to be one of the most inaccurate translations, while also being a fixture in traditionalist Christian circles, **contains the most mentions** of “hell” at 54 occurrences. More accurate translations like the NASB and even the highly popular NIV show the word “hell” occurring between 13-14 times, ALL of which are found in the New Testament.

We're going to look at each of these occurrences, but before we do, I'd like to put these numbers into perspective. Let's look at how often more commonly used words are mentioned in the Bible:

- Heaven – 644 mentions
- Father – 944 mentions
- Evil – 657 mentions
- Law – 599 mentions
- Soul – 496 mentions
- Death – 456 mentions
- Judgement – 344 mentions
- Kingdom – 384 mentions
- Sin – 441 mentions

So just to review, we have *Judgement* mentioned 344 times, *Sin* mentioned 441 times, and *Death* mentioned 456 times, and yet we only see *Hell* mentioned 14 times in accurate translations.

Doesn't that seem weird?

If hell is such a central part of sin, judgment, and death, wouldn't it get talked about at least half as often as these associated words? At this rate, Google wouldn't even know to associate hell with these other words.

Furthermore, IF the common Evangelic view of Hell as a place of eternal, conscious torment is accurate, wouldn't that warrant significantly more discussion than something like poverty, which is talked about over 2,000 times?

If God is actually planning on PERPETUALLY ROASTING BILLIONS OF PEOPLE, allowing them to permanently agonize for all of eternity... isn't that a bit more pressing of a discussion than the 1203 words that are addressed more frequently?

Yes, I did the math, and I did it based on the KJV, giving Hell the benefit of the MOST possible occurrences. Even with 4 times the mentions of most translations, there are **1,203 words used more frequently**.

Is God just super casual about being the cruelest, most perversely genocidal maniac in history? Or did we get the story wrong.

If you are a good Christian, like I used to be, your first question is going to be a very valid one, "Doesn't Jesus speak about Hell?" The simple answer to that question is "no", but in order to make that claim, I'm going to have to get my Greek on.

## There Are 4 Distinct Words Translated As "Hell"

Most of the confusion around Hell starts with translation error. There are four separate Hebrew and Greek words which are translated into the single English word "Hell", despite having drastically different meanings.

1. Sheol (Hebrew)
2. Hades (Greek)
3. Tartarus (Greek)
4. Gehenna (Greek)

The English language is often very limited when trying to express certain concepts. A perfect Biblical example of this is the multiple Greek words translated to the single English word “Love”. Agape is a special version of love that speaks about God’s love toward humanity. Phileo speaks about brotherly love and Eros refers to sexual love or desire.

And just like “love”, the English word “hell” is unilaterally translated from the Greek and Hebrew words Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and Tartarus, each of which have different meanings.

### 1. Sheol (H7585)

שְׁאוֹל שְׁאוֹל

she’ol she’ol

sheh-ole’, sheh-ole’

From H7592; hades or the world of the dead (as if a subterranean retreat), including its accessories and inmates: – grave, hell, pit.

### 2. Hades (G86)

ᾠδης

hadēs

hah’-dace

From G1 (as a negative particle) and G1492; properly unseen, that is, “Hades” or the place (state) of departed souls: – grave, hell.

### 3. Gehenna (G1067)

γέεννα

geenna

gheh’-en-nah

Of Hebrew origin ([H1516] and [H2011]); valley of (the son of) Hinnom; gehenna (or Ge-Hinnom), a valley of Jerusalem

### 4. Tartarus (G5020)

ταρταρώ

tartarō

tar-tar-o’-o

From **Τάρταρος** Tartaros̄ (the deepest abyss of Hades); to incarcerate in eternal torment: – cast down to hell.

Below, I’ve listed the full 13 times “Hell” is used in the NASB translation of the Bible. Sheol and Hades are always correctly translated as “the grave” in the NASB and other more accurate translations, which is why you don’t see any references below. I’ve included those words in our discussion simply because they will come up incorrectly as “Hell” in the KJV.

You’ll notice that NONE of the above 4 words actually translate to Hell. The closest is Hades, which is derived from

Greek mythology and is never actually translated to “Hell” in academically accepted translations. Sheol and Hades are both always translated as “death” or “the grave” in the NASB and other more accurate translations. And as we are about to see, neither Tartarus nor Gehenna can be correctly translated as “Hell” either.

### **In other words, “Hell” is NOT actually in the Bible.**

But a claim like this warrants a worthy defense, and that’s why we are going to look at EVERY single time the word “Hell” is used in the Bible.

Using the NASB, we see 13 references:

- [Matthew 5:22](#) – Gehenna
- [Matthew 5:29](#) – Gehenna
- [Matthew 5:30](#) – Gehenna
- [Matthew 10:28](#) – Gehenna
- [Matthew 18:9](#) – Gehenna
- [Matthew 23:15](#) – Gehenna
- [Matthew 23:33](#) – Gehenna
- [Mark 9:43](#) – Gehenna
- [Mark 9:45](#) – Gehenna
- [Mark 9:47](#) – Gehenna
- [Luke 12:5](#) – Gehenna
- [James 3:6](#) – Gehenna
- [2 Peter 2:4](#) – Tartarus

You will notice then that the full conversation of “Hell” comes down to 12 Gehenna mentions and 1 mention of Tartarus.

Tartarus is not a normal Greek word. Like Hades, it’s the name of a [place/person in Greek mythology](#), appearing in writing 700 years before Christ as part of the Greek poet Hesiod’s *Theogony*. It denotes a dark place below even Hades, and accordingly, is the only one of our 4 words to have “eternal” torment inherently linked to it.

Even if you want to use Greek mythology to defend your views of God, [2 Peter 2:4](#) isn’t talking about people. It’s talking about where God sent fallen angels.

So if you’re keeping track, this leaves us with only ONE single word on which to base our Biblical analysis of the word “Hell”.

Gehenna.

## **Gehenna – A Historic Place of Perpetual Burning**

Gehenna accounts for 12 of the 13 Hell mentions, and most importantly, it comprises 100% of Jesus’ alleged references to “Hell”.



So what is Gehenna?

It's a valley. A literal valley. A physical, geographic location. The Valley of Hinnom. In fact, here's what this valley (and apparently Hell) looks like today.



There it is. And look, passing right through the middle of it is Gey Ben Hinnom St.

The typical response here is that Jesus was using the valley of Hinnom figuratively to mean our modern concept of Hell. But figurative to who?

It really doesn't matter what this valley means to us today. **Jesus wasn't speaking to us.** He was speaking to Jews who lived 2,000 years ago.

### **So the real question is, what did Gehenna mean to the Jews of Jesus' day?**

The section of this valley referred to as "Gehenna" was well known throughout Israel as an evil and dark place, used for a variety of evil acts throughout Israel's history. In the time of Hosea, the rebellious Israelites committed child sacrifice there to honor the pagan god Molech (Molek), as seen in **2 Chron 28:3**.

“Moreover, he burned incense in the valley of Ben-hinnom and burned his sons in fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had driven out before the sons of Israel.

Later, in **2 Kings 23:10**, it says that King Josiah “desecrated Topheth, which was in the Valley of Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice their son or daughter in the fire to Molek.”

This valley was known as a place of fiery torture and sacrifices to honor pagan gods. When King Josiah burned down the evil altars, the location remained a site for burning pagan artifacts as the country was purged of idolatry.

As time went on and there were no more idols to burn, some accounts suggest the people of Jerusalem began dumping and burning their trash in the valley.

Archaeological evidence suggest the valley was a sewage dump during the time of Jesus, but regardless of its literal usage, we know with certainty that the place itself was historically associated with death and fire. When Jesus refers to Gehenna as “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” in [Mark 9](#), he is making a clear connection to the valley’s historic past, using the language of [Isaiah 66](#):

“ And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.

When we look at Israel’s history, we see times when Gehenna was quite literally a place of perpetual fire. We see a dump filled with so many bodies that the worms would never die from lack of sustenance. The valley contained so much trash, thrown out from the besieged city’s walls, that the bodies would burn perpetually without end.

## Sin Invites Hell Into Your Life

Now that we know the historical background of Gehenna, let’s look at what Jesus says about this place.

“ Matthew 5:30 “And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell (Gehenna).”

Remember that dead bodies were literally thrown into this dump during the time of Isaiah and would be again just 40 years after Jesus spoke these words, when the Romans besieged and destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. Rather than discussing the afterlife, Jesus is using a well-known landmark to illustrate how significant and pervasive the destruction of sin is.

**Jesus is literally saying that cutting off your hand will be less damaging to your life than a lifestyle of sin.**

Some streams of Jewish thought view sin as self-inflicted judgment. In other words, when you sin, you inflict judgment upon yourself. This belief is so sincere, that even today, many orthodox Jews believe the Holocaust was their own fault – that it was their deserved judgment for the sins of Israel and the failure of the Jews to bring the world into the knowledge of Yahweh.

As extreme as that sounds, it gives us insight into the perspective of the Jews that were hearing Jesus’ words. It’s better to lose your eye than to let your eye result in your total self-destruction via sin.

In other words, sin isn’t meaningless; it’s literally inviting Hell into your life.

Jesus is using the most disgusting location in Jerusalem to illustrate how destructive sin is and to encourage his audience to overcome it NOW, so they could freely enjoy abundant life instead of falling into self-destructive patterns.



This same concept presents itself in the only non-Gospel use of Gehenna, found in [James 3:6](#),

“ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell (Gehenna).

Evil from one body part corrupts the whole body. Sound familiar?

Jesus’ same teaching on cutting off body parts accounts for 6 of our 12 Gospel mentions of Gehenna due to the story being repeated several times in the Gospels. The James reference gives us a 7th, but speaking of sin isn’t the only way Jesus used Gehenna to make a point.

## Children Of Destruction

In [Matthew 23:15](#) we see Jesus refer to the Pharisees as “Children of Gehenna” and later in [verse 33](#), queries, “how will you escape being condemned to Gehenna?”

This is telling on multiple levels and serves to handily solidify the argument for Jesus referencing literal Gehenna as a meaningful symbol.

For one, the Pharisees were all about perceived righteousness. They obsessively followed every directive of the Law and made a continuous presentation of their cleanliness and piousness.

And here comes Jesus calling them children of the sewer – telling them that for all their pomp and circumstance, their own “righteousness” won’t be enough to save them from the dung heap. It’s even chronologically possible that some of those listening would have their own dead bodies dumped over the city walls and into Gehenna during the Roman siege to come.

To add a second level of insult, remember that in [John 8](#), the Pharisees responded to Jesus’ teaching by boasting that they were sons of Abraham. They took pride in their lineage, and here is Jesus calling them children of the dung heap.

That’s our 8th and 9th Gehenna references.

## But Let’s Assume I’m Wrong

Let’s just assume, for the sake of argument, that Jesus is using Gehenna as a reference to death and the afterlife. While each of the references to Gehenna can be easily interpreted via our new historical lens, there are a few verses where an argument can conceivably be made otherwise.

The best example is seen in [Matthew 10:28](#) and [Luke 12:5](#), (our 10th and 11th Gehenna references) where Jesus says:

“ “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.”

Let's assume here that Jesus is using Gehenna to mean Hell. In this case, we don't see a picture of eternal torment. Jesus is saying to His audience that they should be more concerned about a God who CAN permanently destroy their body and soul.

Let's look at that word "destroy".

## **Destroy (G622)**

ἀπόλλυμι

apollumi

ap-ol'-loo-mee

From G575 and the base of G3639; to destroy fully (reflexively to perish, or lose), literally or figuratively: – destroy, die, lose, mar, perish.

That's a word of finality. It's not a word of perpetual torment. The entire idea of perpetual fire comes from the imagery of Gehenna. Even if we interpret Jesus to be figuratively referencing Hell, where's the eternal suffering of unbelieving humans? Where is that narrative?

Furthermore, if we take this back to Hebrew thought, we see that the Jews believed all good and evil to come from God. Through this lens, it's far more probable that Jesus is yet again discussing the destruction of sin in Matt 10:28... certainly more probable than believing "I CAN destroy you" means "I'm planning to torture you forever".

## **Conclusion**

At this point, we're left with just one reference from which to derive a doctrine of eternal torture. [Matthew 5:22](#) says,

“ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery Gehenna.

Yet again, this passage seems to corroborate the idea of a literal Gehenna without suggesting eternal torture. There's nothing unusual to this other than Jesus raising the standard of what constitutes a punishable offense. Whoever heard of going to court for being angry?

If anything, this points back to our original discussion of Gehenna. Jesus is demonstrating how little it takes for sin to work its destruction. Just a bit of unresolved anger, then a deepening of the relational divide, then you are at the point of actually despising your brother and the destruction is already upon you.

Is that a little bit of a stretch? Perhaps.

But certainly not as much of a stretch as looking at these 13 passages and somehow coming away with a God who tortures people mercilessly for all eternity.

???How???

This narrative is not only poor exegesis and bad theology, it also replaces the face of a loving Father (bringing good news) with the nightmarish mask of a merciless tormentor.

If the Bible explicitly supported this idea, we'd be forced to make a more difficult choice. But it doesn't. Not in the slightest.

For all intents and purposes, the word "Hell" isn't even in the Bible.

But we aren't quite done. In Part 2, we look at several passages of scripture that suggest a Hell-like narrative without actually using the word "Hell". Stuff like the lake of fire, the parable of the sheep and the goats, and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. We'll use this to round out our discussion of Hell's absence from the Bible and then examine where the modern concept of Hell actually originated.

# BRAZEN CHURCH

## Part 2: Why Fiery Lakes, The Parable of Lazarus & Gnashing Teeth Can't Conjure Up Eternal Torment

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WHY FIERY LAKES, TORMENTED LAZARUS & TEETH  
GNASHING CAN'T CONJURE UP ETERNAL TORTURE



No matter where you look, you can't convincingly defend the idea of eternal torment through Scripture.

In the last section, we looked at [every single time the Bible mentions "Hell"](#), and we discovered that, in essence, it doesn't. While there are 4 words that are sometimes translated as "Hell", none of them actually mean anything resembling our modern concept of Hell.

BUT... as many of our intelligent readers were quick to point out, showing the *word* "Hell" is missing from the Bible does not conclusively prove the *concept* of Hell is not present in the Bible.

So that's what we'll be looking at today – the other parts – the Biblical passages that seem to suggest eternal torment without using the word "Hell". We'll cover:

1. Weeping, Gnashing of Teeth & Outer Darkness
2. The Parable of the Sheep & The Goats
3. The Parable of Lazarus & The Rich Man (featuring Brad Jersak)
4. Revelation & The Lake of Fire
5. Paul's "Everlasting Destruction" In 2 Thessalonians

Plus, we'll take a look at a key word in John 3:16 that is mistranslated!

Let's get started by establishing some context.

## How Context Will Influence This Discussion

Reading a verse gives you a very narrow context for interpreting its meaning. Reading the full chapter will improve your context, but not as much as reading and meditating on the entire book. And even reading the whole book isn't enough, as you still don't understand the context the book was written in, the people it was written for, or the external events, stories, places & ideas it references.

Further complicating things, nearly all the passages we will discuss today are parables or stories that include figurative language and references to external ideas, some of which we know about and some of which we may not.

What's my point?

In our last article, we made a compelling, black and white case against translations of the word "Hell" meaning a place of eternal torment. Because our focus was so narrow – refuting the interpretation of 13 words – a black & white approach was appropriate.

Today, taking such an approach would be a disservice to you. There is a vastly broader context to every one of the following passages. Trying to conclusively eliminate eternal torment as a POSSIBLE interpretation would be dishonest. Rather, our goal is to demonstrate that eternal torment is not the BEST interpretation given a broader Biblical context.

If you want to confine your theology to a verse-by-verse context, [here are 21 verses](#) that explicitly say the wicked will be permanently destroyed. And [here are 21 verses](#) that say God will save ALL men.

But if you are interested in taking a broader view of Scripture, that's what we'll be attempting to do today.

## 1. Weeping, Gnashing of Teeth & Outer Darkness

One of the theme's that came up frequently in last week's comments was Jesus' references to weeping, gnashing of teeth, and outer darkness. We see this on multiple occasions, in Matthew 8, 13, 22, 24, 25 and Luke 13.

“ I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline *at the table* with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. – Matthew 8:11-12

It's intriguing to me that so many think of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" as a reference to physical torture. If you told me your friend was "crying and grinding his teeth" I wouldn't think, "Well he's clearly being tortured." More importantly, if we look in [Acts 7](#), we see another reference to teeth gnashing.

“ You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and **gnashed their teeth** at him.

What's most intriguing to me about this passage is that this particular language is used in reference to the religious elite and their response to the Gospel.

Why is this interesting?

**Because virtually every time Jesus mentions “gnashing of teeth”, he is talking to or about the religious elite.**

In [Matt 8](#), Jesus sees the faith of the centurion and says many will come to sit at the table with Israel's revered fathers in the kingdom of heaven, but the “sons of the kingdom” will be cast into darkness, where they will weep and gnash their teeth.

Who are the “sons of the kingdom”? The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And more specifically, Jesus seems to be focusing on those who would identify themselves as “sons of the kingdom” while rejecting His ministry. We know from [John 8](#) that Pharisees often boasted in their status as children of Abraham while rejecting Jesus' words.

[Luke 13](#) is even more telling. We see this exact same language being used as Jesus is talking in the presence of the Pharisees.

“ <sup>23</sup> And someone said to Him, “Lord, are there *just* a few who are being saved?” And He said to them, <sup>24</sup> “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. <sup>25</sup> Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open up to us!’ then He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ <sup>26</sup> Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets’; <sup>27</sup> and He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers.’ <sup>28</sup> **In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out.** <sup>29</sup> And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline *at the table* in the kingdom of God. <sup>30</sup> And behold, *some* are last who will be first and *some* are first who will be last.”

It's fascinating that Jesus' figurative warnings, in a similar manner to [his mentions of Gehenna](#), are NOT made



towards the criminals or other types we would typically think of as sinners.

His response when asked about sinners is, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

His response to the adulteress is, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

But to the Pharisees, the religious elite, He tells them they cannot escape Gehenna and offers parable after parable warning of weeping and gnashing of teeth. And what’s more, they knew definitely that Jesus was talking to them.

“ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.

In Matthew 24:51, Jesus makes a special reference to this place of weeping being occupied by the hypocrites, a word He also used to describe the Pharisees.

“ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is where we get back to the context I mentioned earlier. Yes, you could look at any one of these parables and apply it unilaterally to all people, but that’s not the context in which these stories were given. When we step back and take a broader view, we don’t see threats of eternal torment to the unbeliever, we see a warning to the religious hypocrites.

We see Jesus telling those who consider themselves the “first”, the “sons of the kingdom”, the descendants of the patriarchs, that their end will not be as they expect.

## 2. The Sheep & The Goats – There Is No “Eternity”

Now let’s zero in on a specific one of these parables – one that is often viewed as a picture of the final judgment. The parable of the sheep and the goats.

In the last few verses of the parable, it says:

“ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

This is where the rubber really meets the road. The phrase is right there: “eternal punishment”.

And this is where we discover, yet again, that some of our core perceptions of the Bible are the result of outdated

Greek translations.

The word *punishment* used here is *iskolasis*, which can also be translated as “correction”. It speaks to the idea of corrective punishment.

The word *eternal* used here is *aiōnios*, and like Gehenna, it has been completely mistranslated throughout the New Testament. As [NT Greek teacher Richard Liantonio explains](#), *aiōnios* actually refers to the length of an Age or “from age to age”. In Greek, an Age could refer to a generation, lifetime, or a longer, finite length of time. It’s where we get our word “eon”. It also correlates with the Hebrew word *Yom*, which denotes anything from a 24-hour period to an epoch season.

What this means is that any time we see the term “eternal life” in the New Testament, it should actually be translated as “life of the Age”.

Think about that for a second. That’s a pretty big deal.

Among other important things, it means that this phrase “eternal punishment” could more accurately be viewed as **“correction for the length of the Age”**.

This paints a VERY different picture than the one we are used to, but when we dig a bit deeper, we find it to be far more congruent with scripture than our old paradigm.

There is a profound difference between restorative punishment and retributive punishment. In the Western world, we operate based on retributive justice. You committed a felony? You are punished by going to jail. You murdered someone? You are put to death or sent to jail for life. These punishments are not distributed with a positive outcome in mind. They are not intended to rehabilitate or restore. They are society’s retribution upon the wrongdoer, intended solely to punish and perhaps discourage others from wrongdoing for fear of punishment.

**Since non-restorative punishment is our idea of justice, it’s no surprise we project it onto God.**

But this is NOT the God we see in the Bible. God’s heart is ALWAYS to restore. We see this time and time and time again throughout His dealings with Israel.

Even if we take a traditionalist view of Israel’s calamities as the active hand of God punishing His people, we still see a God longing to bring His people back to Himself. We see [Jesus lamenting](#) that Jerusalem so often denied His protection.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

The God of Israel always punished to restore, and that’s what we see in an accurate translation of Matthew 25:46 – not “eternal punishment” but “correction for the length of an age”.

### 3. The Parable of Lazarus & The Rich Man

The parable of Lazarus in Luke 16 offers us the only true visual of afterlife torment found in Scripture. For an in-depth dive into this parable, we turn to theologian Brad Jersak, who has graciously allowed us to share his analysis with you.

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Throughout the ‘hell debates’ of recent years, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) has repeatedly begged our attention, especially in Q&A times following the documentary, *Hellbound?* The dialogue has urged me towards a sharper focus on the layered functions of the parable than I offered in my contemplative read in *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*.<sup>[1]</sup> Herein, I will introduce an outline that I hope invites fuller treatment.

## **False functions**

First, we ought to dismiss the false functions of the parable as assigned by traditional (but sloppy) literalism. Readers often imagine that Jesus’ intent is to describe the nature of divine judgment and the state of the damned—or ‘hell’ (lit. *hades*), defined as an inescapable place of fiery judgment. The symbolic nature of parables is frequently negated and the passage treated as a revelation of the afterlife.

Briefly, interpreting the story of Dives (Lat. ‘rich man’ in the Vulgate) and Lazarus as descriptive of ‘hell’ ignores the difference between *hades* and *paradise* vis-à-vis *heaven* and *hell*, both biblically and theologically, even by literalist standards. The text says the rich man is in *hades*, borrowed from Greek language and mythology to correspond with the Hebrew *Sheol*—the place of the dead or the grave *prior to* the final Day of Judgment. This is confirmed by the rich man’s desire to send a warning to his brothers *before* it is too late. Thus, whatever the rich man is suffering, it is a precursor to the Day of the Lord and distinct from the infernalist’s typical everlasting ‘lake of fire.’

Moreover, aspects of the story make a crass literalism awkward: how does the rich man communicate with Abraham across the chasm? Does everyone there have a direct line to the patriarch? Does someone being incinerated in a furnace care about thirst? Are these literal flames? And since *hades* precedes the resurrection of the body, do we have literal tongues with which to feel thirst? Is this also the literal Abraham? Do the millions in his care take turns snuggling with him? Or is his bosom big enough to contain us all at once? How big he must be! And so on into implausibility.

Taking the parable seriously means we mustn’t take it so literally. Rather than text-mining for the architecture of the underworld, we ought to be digging for the intended message of Jesus. He is using the afterlife to illuminate some truth about this life. If we read carefully, we begin to see hints of the rich strata of meaning that beckon us deeper beneath the surface. I will propose three such layers here.

## **Jesus’ use of the parable – economic inversion**

Gospel scholars usually agree that Jesus’ parables often employ Second Temple Jewish beliefs precisely in order to challenge them.<sup>[2]</sup> Christ enfolded their religious assumptions into his parables, then immediately moves to invert or subvert them. In his portrait of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus neither composes nor endorses the narrational stage on which he makes his point. Rather, this parable exemplifies Jesus’ use of popular first-century imagery in order to challenge his opponents’ rutted mindsets.

So, Jesus' use of hades and 'Abraham's bosom' is not tacit agreement with rabbinical speculation concerning the hereafter. In fact, the various Jewish traditions span a vast spectrum over many centuries amidst much in-house debate.

The biblical prophets primarily describe divine judgment in terms of this life. Jeremiah forecasts the flames of national destruction in the Valley of the sons of Hinnom (Gk. LXX – gehenna), south of Jerusalem. Isaiah envisions the corpses of dead bodies outside the walls of the New Jerusalem. Malachi prophesies the wicked reduced to ashes to be trampled underfoot. Gehenna was a prophetic symbol for the fiery demolition(s) of earthly Jerusalem. [3]

The Hebrew sheol, on the other hand, is predominantly thought of as the grave—where the righteous and wicked alike sleep in the dust—or at most, it's a place of silence and oblivion where one may have a shadowy existence in either peace or gloom.[4]

Intertestamental apocalyptic authors like Enoch, Esdras and Judith went further: they conceive gehenna as an afterlife of retributive punishment in furnaces beneath the earth, where angels inflict punishment. A few passages describe eternal torment, others annihilation and still others a temporary purgatory. By the first century, Rabbis were deferring and transposing national destruction texts (e.g. Zech. 13:8) into an otherworld judgment. But this judgment could have a time limit (most commonly one year), after which the wicked were either consumed or their purification was complete. One could escape if, for example, they had given alms to the poor during their life or if their family was faithful with the liturgical prayers of their mourning period.[5]

Regardless, Jesus' purpose in this parable was not to bring the definitive revelation on the nature of hades. What exactly is he up to? He is incorporating some contemporary Jewish imagery to make a profound and prophetic ethical point.

From the beginning of Luke 16, the immediate topical context of Jesus' discourse is the management of wealth, the idolatry of mammon and the perilous state of the rich. That is, we have a series of messages that address the ethics of worldly wealth. Jesus, following the Hebrew prophetic tradition, confronts those who are rich and powerful now.

They will be pulled down and weep later while those who suffer poverty now will be lifted up into comfort.

This is a recurring theme in Luke, as we recall the Magnificat of Mary (esp. Luke 1:52-53) and Jesus' Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-26). Both passages describe the rich toppled from power and prosperity while the poor are lifted into abundance. At the eschatological banquet, contrary to expectations, the wealthy will find themselves excluded from table and the poor granted a place of honor for the feast.

In this parable, Jesus specifically targets some sneering Pharisees who, we're told, loved money (16:14). When he tells them the story, Jesus is not spiritualizing riches and poverty here. He quite literally means that the rich and poor in this age will see a reversal of fortunes in the next. In light of this sobering revelation, Jesus is not asking, "So, are you rich or poor?" No, he is saying, rather, "You are rich. Period. Now ask yourself, who is the poor man at your gate? Moses and the Prophets and now I exhort you to treat him with justice, mercy and compassion, lest you follow the fate of the rich man of this tragic story." [6]

## Luke's use of the parable – social inversion

A second layer of meaning may suggest itself as Luke applies the parable to the social context and concerns of the early church. Some textual clues point to this secondary exhortation, challenging either Christian Judaizers who marginalized Gentile believers (as in Galatia) and/or Jewish leaders (especially Pharisees) who expelled Jewish Christians from their synagogues. Again, the story presages a coming upheaval of fortunes, when insiders with perceived leverage lose their place of favor to those outside the gates.

How is Jesus' message transposed from rich-poor to Jew-Gentile in the text? Possible intimations of this move include the following:

- The Hellenized name, Lazarus, may recall Eleazar (Hebrew for 'God is my help') of Damascus—the Gentile servant of Abraham. As Abraham's faithful steward, Eleazar had been heir to the patriarch's estate (Gen. 5:2-3) but was de facto disinherited through God's covenant to grant Abraham and Sarah a son. All of Abraham's wealth, reserved for Eleazar for many decades, was left to Abraham's flesh and blood heirs (Isaac, Jacob and their progeny – Gen. 15:4-5; 24:36), effectively leaving Eleazar with nothing. He and his children would remain servants ('beggars at the gate'), dependent on the family's charity. This may be why we see Lazarus with Abraham in the parable and why the rich man acts as if he is still on call for errands in Abraham's service—and his own, for that matter.
- Lazarus is said to beg outside the rich man's gate (v. 19). He longs to eat even the rich man's table scraps. This is reminiscent of the Gospel story in which Jesus reserved his healing ministry for "the lost sheep of Israel" but a Canaanite woman appealed: "Even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Note the multiple allusions with Lazarus, who "... longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table" and "Even the dogs came and licked his sores" (v. 21).
- Uncircumcised Gentile proselytes of Judaism were referred to as "gate proselytes" or "strangers inside the gate."<sup>[7]</sup> They enjoyed certain rights and privileges under the Mosaic Law. Is the parable condemning the rich man for leaving Lazarus outside when the Law obligated Jews to provide for foreigners inside? Or more shocking, is Jesus saying that even those legally outside the gates (non-proselyte Gentiles) may displace Abraham's sons in paradise!<sup>[8]</sup>
- Further, we are told the rich man has five brothers (v. 28). Judah, like the rich man, had five brothers (Gen. 35:23). Historically, the Jewish temple and priesthood ('dressed in linen') as well as her throne and king ('fine purple') were centered in Judah's capital, Jerusalem (v. 19). They were graced with the oracles of God ('They have Moses and the Prophets' – v. 29). But even then, rather than making God's temple "a house of prayer for the Gentiles / nations," a corrupt priesthood had turned it into "a den of thieves" (cf. Jer. 7).
- Some even see the 'great gulf' as a symbolized reference to the Jordan Rift Valley<sup>[9]</sup> (including the Dead Sea – i.e. 'the lake of fire'<sup>[10]</sup>), dividing Abraham's Promised Land from the Gentile territories. Maybe – but we do know that crossing the Jordan into Canaan became a metaphor for salvation. If so, again, the rich man and Lazarus—as Jew and Gentile—have undergone a surprising reversal of spiritual locales.

Did Jesus intend this secondary application of his parable? Perhaps. Did Luke import the story into the Jew-Gentile tensions he regularly encountered while traveling with Paul? Very likely, given their confrontations with both Jews

and Judaizers throughout the missionary journeys. In any case, the inversion has occurred and recurred as prophesied on many catastrophic occasions. In Romans 11:17-21, Paul warns the Gentiles against arrogance, because the reversal can work both ways. “If God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either” (21). As such, the parable stands as a portent to all who perpetrate racial exclusion—or erect any other “wall of partition which Christ died to break” (Eph. 2:14).

### **Punch line of all parables – Jesus death and resurrection**

Speaking to a third and ultimate layer, I believe the fullness of Christ’s parables were veiled throughout his life and ministry because beneath and beyond his ethical-prophetic message lay a deeper meaning. Namely, the parables of the Kingdom of God only find their telos—their punch line—in Christ’s death and resurrection. Joseph Ratzinger suggested this in *Jesus of Nazareth* (vol. 1):

“ It is on the Cross that the parables are unlocked. In his Farewell Discourse, the Lord says, apropos of this: “I have said this to you in parables [i.e., veiled discourse]; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in parables but tell you plainly of the Father: (Jn 16:25). The parables speak in a hidden way, then, of the mystery of the Cross ... they becomes stations on the way to the Cross.[11]

What teasers of Jesus’ death and resurrection are insinuated in the tale of Dives and Lazarus?

- Good Friday: The suffering of Lazarus foreshadowed Christ’s passion. Ratzinger sees two clues:

“ Do we not recognize in the figure of Lazarus—lying at the rich man’s door covered in sores—the mystery of Jesus, who “suffered outside the city walls” (Heb 13:12) and, stretched naked on the Cross, was delivered over to the mockery and contempt of the mob, his body “full of blood and wounds”?[12]

- Holy Saturday: Hades and the chasm that can never be crossed conceal what is only revealed through Christ’s descensus on Holy Saturday. In death, Christ does cross the chasm, descends into hades, evangelizes the dead (nekrois euēngelīsthē)—those who were judged in the flesh (1 Pet. 4:6 – krithōsi men kata anthrōpous sarki)— makes them alive in the spirit (1 Pet 3:18–21 – zōopoiētheis de pneumatī) and leads a parade of captives out of captivity into paradise (Eph 4:8–9). Where the gates of hades were previously impenetrable, Christ now holds the keys (Rev. 1:18). He will, in the end, throw death and hades into the lake of fire (Rev. 21:14) and so death will die. Richard Baukham says this drama was common in early Christian proclamation:

“ “Jesus breaks down the gates of the underworld (Odes Sol 17:9–11; Teachings of Silvanus, NHC 7.110.19–34; Tertullian, *De Res. Carn.* 44), releases the captive dead (Odes Sol 17:12; 22:4; Acts Thom 10), or destroys death or Hades (Melito, *Peri Pascha* 102).”[13]

- Easter Sunday: The parabolic Lazarus and Lazarus of Bethany become precursors of Christ’s archetypal resurrection. Again, Ratzinger:



“ He, the true Lazarus, has risen from the dead—and he has come to tell us so. If we see in the story of Lazarus Jesus’ answer to his generation’s demand for a sign, we find ourselves in harmony with the principal answer that Jesus gave to that demand. [cf. Matt 12:39ff; Luke 11:29ff]...

He, crucified and risen, is the true Lazarus. The parable is inviting us to believe and follow him, God’s great sign. But it is more than a parable. It speaks of reality, of the most decisive reality in all history.[14]

Having failed to hear Moses and the Prophets, Abraham tells the rich man, even if someone were to rise from the dead, his brothers would not be convinced to repent (Luke 16:30-31). And so it was: first Lazarus of Bethany is raised, then Christ himself returns from hades, yet the Temple establishment / Sanhedrin still refused to believe.

## Summary

Thus, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus stands, not as a cosmological lesson, but as a three-fold somber warning and encouragement for today:

First, to those with worldly wealth—us!—to the first world west that consumes four times more than the global average, be warned. Take note of the poor at your gates—treat them with equity and charity—for the days are coming when you too may sit outside their gates and thirst for a drop of justice or a crumb of mercy.

Second, to those with social capital within the church—us!—to those whose idea of holiness or protocol bars the door or excludes from the table those for whom Christ died, be warned. The Spirit of Christ broke the dividing wall between Jews and Greeks, males and females, freemen and slaves. He’s probably not done. Don’t get crushed in the rubble.

Finally, let’s rejoice in the redeeming power of Christ’s death, descent and resurrection, through which he has freed us from the dominion of hades and gathered us with him into the bosom of his Father. What the covenant people of God once failed to perceive, let us excel not fail to boldly proclaim in our time: “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

[1] Brad Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell and the New Jerusalem* (Wipf & Stock, 2009), Excursus 1: The Rich Man and Lazarus.

[2] E.g. Derek Flood, “The More I Follow Jesus,” *Huffington Post* (09/21/11).

[3] For a full study, cf. Jersak, *Her Gates*, chapter 3.

[4] For primary sources, Jersak, *Her Gates*, 17-18.

[5] For primary sources, Jersak, *Her Gates*, 46-51.

[6] This punch-line was suggested to me by Scott McKnight.

[7] Ger toshav (Hebrew: **גר תושב** ger “foreigner” + toshav “resident”).

Exodus 20:9-10, Deut 5:13-14, 120-29, 16:10-14, 24:13-14, 26:11-12, 31:11-12.

[8] Matt. 8:11-12 “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven

But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

[9] The Jordan rift valley stretches south from Mount Herman, through the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba.

[10] Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*, ch. 5.

[11] Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007), 190-91.

[12] Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007), 216-17.

[13] Bauckham, “Descent to the Underworld,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Eerdmans, 1993), 157

[14] Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007), 216-217.

## 4. Revelation & The Lake of Fire

There are a total of five verses that mention “the Lake of Fire” In scripture. All of these scriptures are found in later half of the book of Revelation in chapters 19, 20 and 21.

Revelation is a unique book. It’s the only Apocalyptic book included in the New Testament canon. It was written at least several decades after Christ’s crucifixion and is much different than any other book found in the new testament.

Apocalypticism is a type of genre that is very much symbolic and cryptic in nature. Symbols are usually culturally developed and must be interpreted using that culture’s perspective or lens. We must look at other examples of writing that mention these symbols and see if we can find patterns and similarities in their contexts and meanings.

**In other words, the book of Revelation CANNOT be read literally.**

In fact, reading Revelation literally is pretty much the only way to be 100% confident you are interpreting it WRONG.

When Apocalyptic language is used in the Bible, it very often correlates with mythologies that would have been prevalent when the book was written.

One prominent example of this is the [mythology of Tiamat](#). In many [near eastern mythologies](#) surrounding the Mesopotamian Area, including those of the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, *Tiamat* was known as the primordial goddess of the ocean, who mates with Abzu (the god of fresh water) to produce younger gods and subsequently, the cosmos. In the Babylonian creation myth, she is depicted as a sea serpent or dragon, who is defeated by Marduk. Many sources identify her with images of a sea serpent or dragon.

Why am I telling you this? Because we see places all over the Bible that allude to Tiamat. Remember the imagery in [Genesis 1](#)?

“ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters...

... And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

This depiction – the void and the water, the separation of the waters in the forming of creation – this imagery is remarkably similar to what we find in the story of Tiamat. And it doesn’t stop here. The depiction of Tiamat as a sea dragon might as well be the Hebrew Leviathan, referenced in Job 3:8, Amos 9:3, Psalm 74:13-23, Psalm 104:26, and Isaiah 27:1.

But most importantly, and the reason we are talking about it now, the story of Tiamat’s fight with Marduk is strikingly similar to the account of God’s battle with “the dragon” in Revelation. Furthermore, according to Hermann Gunkel’s *Religio-historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, “it was common for Near Eastern religions to include a *Chaoskampf*: a cosmic battle between a sea monster representing the forces of chaos and a creator god or culture hero who imposes order by force.”

**In other words, history suggests the central battle of Revelation is not a foretelling of some final showdown between God and devil, but rather, a symbolic story based heavily on local creation mythology.**

That’s not something you typically hear about on Sunday morning.

But what about the lake of fire?

A common thread we tend to see in this genre of writing is an ever present dualism that lies at the core of every story. Good and evil are personified and we see that evil is punished after its defeat.

In Daniel 7:11, we read,

“ Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire.

And similar, in Revelation 20:10,

“ 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.

Just as the beasts in Daniel were highly figurative, symbolically represented various nations, so too is the lake of burning sulfur figurative. Why would we cherry pick this one piece of the Apocalyptic story as literal when we known undoubtedly that everything else in the story is figurative?

Since Revelation is an extreme display of symbolism, the lake of fire could represent multiple concepts.

In [Revelation 20:14](#), we see Death and Hades thrown into the lake of fire. This could very well mean that the lake of

fire represents God's eternal triumph over evil, sin, and death.

We know that both judgement and destruction are often represented in the Bible as some sort of fire or flame. We know that a "lake of fire" plays heavily into the Near Eastern concept of bodies of water representing disorder or Chaos. Jesus calming the sea in the Gospel which was much bigger than just a supernatural miracle. Only Yahweh could bring order out of Chaos, and we see Christ being very intentional in that display. People who heard that story circulating would have understood the deeper meaning.

These symbols could be pointing to God as the proverbial hero who will ultimately prevail.

In an alternative view, it should be noted that the word for "torment" in Revelation 14:10 is the Greek "basanizo" which has a primary meaning of testing with a touchstone. This suggests that the lake of fire might not be for torment or destruction, but rather, for "testing". The language used here creates an analogy to the testing metal with a touchstone in order to make sure it is pure.

This idea seems to fit with [1 Corinthians 3:13-15](#),

“ ... each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

At the end of the day, it's difficult to make absolute conclusions about symbolic stories, which is why every Christian you've ever met has a different view of eschatology.

But what we don't see here is the conclusive idea that people will be tortured for eternity.

## 5. “Everlasting Destruction” In 2 Thessalonians

As our final stop on today's journey, we'll look at 2 Thessalonians 1:5-9,

“ *This is* a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is *only* just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and *to give* relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

This is a fascinating verse, because at face value, it pretty much throws a monkey wrench in every possible view of the afterlife.

If you believe in the mainstream concept of Hell, the word "destruction" is not helping you out. If you believe in Christian Universalism, the word "destruction" is not helping you out. If you believe in the annihilation of the wicked, or are simply reading this verse as a rational human being, the combination of "eternal" and "destruction"

simply doesn't make sense.

As we previously discussed, the Greek word *aioῆnios*, doesn't mean "eternal", it signifies the duration of the Age. But even still, we are left confused. "Destruction for an age" doesn't make sense in this context. Any way you look at it, either Paul is talking about something that escapes our understanding or this phrase is mistranslated.

According to Dr. Peter Bluer, this dilemma is solved by a more in depth look at this word for "destruction" – **ολεθρος** or *olethros*. In [Dr. Bluer's 38 page exposition](#) of this phrase, he demonstrates that *olethros* is most accurately translated here as the state of being lost.

"These will pay the penalty in the age (or eon) of loss from the face of the Lord and the glory of His strength."

Or alternatively, "These will suffer the age of loss from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His strength."

Not only does this make perfect sense, but it fits perfectly with similar wording throughout the New Testament, as Dr. Bluer covers in his exposition. Most notably, we find in these verses that the same word **ἀπόλλυμι** used in both John 3:16...

" For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish (**ἀπόλλυμι**), but have eternal life.

... and in the story of the Prodigal Son's return in Luke 15:32,

" But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was* lost (**ἀπόλλυμι**) and has been found.

This same word **ἀπόλλυμι** is translated as both "perish" and "lost". Since "perish" cannot be used correctly in Luke 15:32, it would make sense that John 3:16 might be more accurately read as,

**"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not be lost, but have the Age of life."**

And we know [how God responds to those who are lost](#).

## Conclusion

Thanks for joining us in this important discussion. As we've seen in the last two parts, it takes a deeper look into Scripture to actually understand it, especially when we are 2,000+ years removed from it's intended audience.

But the early church fathers weren't so removed. In Part 3, we'll finish off this series by looking at the writings of early church fathers and examining the very non-Biblical places our modern view of Hell actually originates.

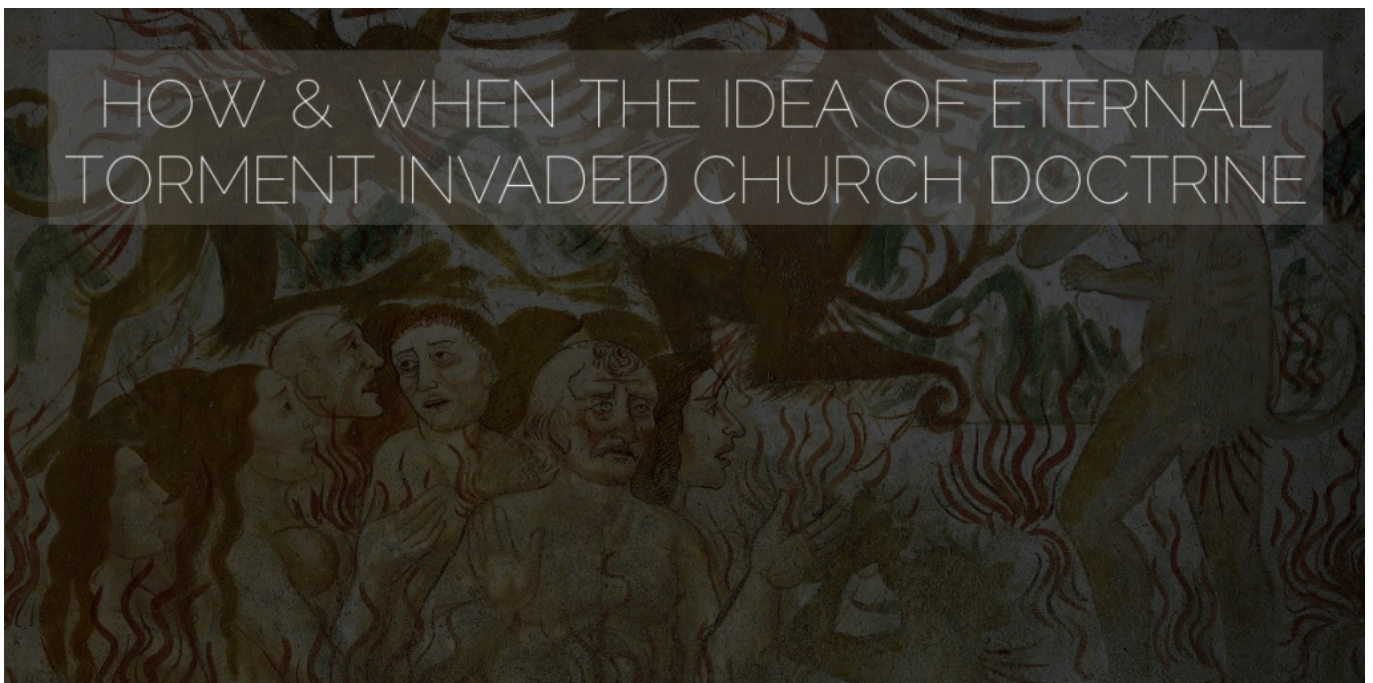


# BRAZEN CHURCH



## Part 3: How & When Eternal Torment Invaded Church Doctrine

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We've covered quite a bit so far in our discussion on Hell. We looked at every time the word "Hell" is mentioned in scripture (and discovered it basically isn't... ever) and then we looked at every passage seeming to suggest eternal torment (and found how poorly we understand stuff that wasn't written to us).

But get excited, because like Jesus distributing wine at a wedding, we've saved the best for last.

While our past work has established that the concept of Hell can't be adequately sourced from the Bible, today, we'll be looking at Church history to see how Hell lodged itself into Christian beliefs. We'll show you where on the timeline eternal torment became a thing people believed in, we'll look at the decidedly non-Biblical sources where it originated, and we'll even examine why it stuck around.

For our discussion today, we've partnered with [Julie Ferwerda](#), author of *Raising Hell: Christianity's Most Controversial Doctrine Put Under Fire*. The following article includes excerpts from *Raising Hell* that have been Brazen Churchishly adapted for you guys!



At the end, we'll tell you how to get a free copy of Julie's exhaustively researched and incredibly well-sourced book!

## The Irony of “Orthodoxy”

When you begin to study Church history, you quickly realize that “orthodox Christianity” is an oxymoron. We are not referring to the proper noun here, as in the Orthodox Church, but to the common noun. Merriam Webster defines *orthodoxas*, “conforming to established doctrine, especially in religion.”<sup>[1]</sup> You might also hear it defined as “right doctrine.”

People tend to have this idea that there is an orthodox doctrine – that there are certain truths and doctrines that have always been peacefully and consensually agreed upon and accepted by the majority of “people like us” throughout all the centuries. And as the story goes, various groups of “heretics” have attempted to tamper with this “right doctrine” throughout history, only to fail miserably as the truth remained undiluted over the centuries.

These are the assumptions many of us grew up believing. We were handed an absolute narrative, told that it has withstood the test of time, and invited nicely to never question it ever... or else. Mainstream Christianity wants us to think there has always been a harmonious consensus, and those who question are not simply disagreeing with their pastor... oh no! You are going against 2,000 years of what “those who follow the Spirit of God” have always believed and accepted as truth.

While tradition and orthodoxy have been instrumental in preserving certain truths – and indeed, there is a profound beauty to be found in sacramental liturgy – the reality is that for centuries, Christian Orthodoxy preserved itself through fear and control, opting to protect its doctrinal “truth” through the active suppression of opposing ideas.

What's particularly ironic is that the modern Evangelical Church tries hard to distance itself from the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church while the core of its theology comes directly out of the councils, doctrines, and creeds established by the early Roman Catholic and Latin Church.

The truth is that since the very beginning, Church history has been rife with unrest, conflict, and even bloodshed—primarily over matters of establishing orthodoxy. And with today's easy access to the annals of Church history, it's time for us churchgoers to rethink the *myth of orthodoxy*, and begin re-evaluating what we've been taught.

For instance, many Christians insist that if you question hell, you are rejecting what has always been agreed upon by the Church, yet **the doctrine of eternal torment was not a widely held view for the first five centuries after Christ**, particularly in the early *Eastern* Church, the Church of the early apostles and Church fathers such as Paul, Clement of Alexandria, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Origen, and others.

What we do see during this time is the expansion and proliferation of pagan myths about the afterlife, which were then repackaged as eternal, fiery torment in the Western (Catholic) Church, primarily by Latin theologians and Church leaders from Rome. It seems this was most likely motivated by political expediency. The idea of eternal torment was a prime tool for controlling the average churchgoer with fear and was congruent with secular mythologies of the time. Later, pop culture added fuel to the fire (pun intended) through imaginative works like *Dante's Inferno*.

[i] “Orthodox,” Merriam-Webster, Inc.: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/orthodox> (accessed April 28, 2011).

## That Awkward Moment Eternity Slipped In

The invasion of Hell into Church doctrine ultimately starts with the invasion of “eternity”. As we discussed in [Part 2 of our Hell Series](#), words like “eternity, eternal, everlasting, etc” don’t truly exist in scripture. Rather, these words are all derived from the root word *Aión* which means “an Age” or “Eon”.

Take a phrase like *aionas ton aionon*. This phrase shows up several times in the Greek New Testament (Romans 20:10, for example) and has been traditionally translated as “forever and ever”.

But here’s the problem. *Aión* means “Age”, not “forever”. And even worse, *ton* means “of”, NOT “and”. [For example](#), Abraham was the father of (ton) Isaac. ALL THREE WORDS of this phrase are [completely mistranslated](#). What it actually says is “Ages of the Ages”.

We see this root word *Aión* every time we see “eternal”, “eternity”, “forever”, “everlasting”, etc. All of these words revolve around the concept of Ages.

So why are we telling you this?

Because “Ages” played a crucial role in the way early Church fathers viewed life. It was a highly significant paradigm to how they viewed God, this life, the afterlife, etc.

Due to the history of the Biblical text and the numerous influences in its popular translations, we’ve been left with a very Plato-esque focus on this concept called eternity. But that was not the paradigm of the “orthodox” church until St. Augustine, a student of Plato, funneled Christian doctrine through [Plato’s teachings](#) of the “eternal soul”.

Plato made several [philosophical arguments](#) that have ironically come to define our mainstream Christian paradigms.

1. First, Plato believed that the soul was separate from the body and that the soul was fundamentally pure but tends to become deformed through association with the body.
2. Second, like his teacher Socrates, Plato believed that the soul itself was immortal, thus necessitating an eternal destination for the soul after the body dies.
3. Third, Plato proposed that good actions result in a reward in this life, but more importantly, a greater reward after death. Similarly, bad actions result in consequences in this life, but even greater punishment after death.

Plato linked some of his ideas to prevailing Greek mythology, including the locations of Hades and Tartarus. In Greek mythology, Tartarus is the location deep below Hades where the Titans were enslaved and the wicked were tormented. According to Plato, this is where divine punishment was meted out.

It is of this philosopher that St. Augustine [remarked](#),

“ “The utterance of Plato, the most pure and bright in all philosophy, scattering the clouds of error . . .”

These ideas proposed by Plato are not from the Bible. They are Greek philosophy. BUT we have spent centuries reading them into the Biblical text and even translating the Biblical text through their lens.

But if we go back before the time of Augustine, we find 5 centuries of Church fathers who never carried this lens.

(Click [here](#) if you'd like a more in-depth look at how “Eternity” weaseled it's way into scripture)

## How Hell Invaded Church Doctrine

The big point we are building up to here is that the early church fathers DID NOT believe in eternal torment. We aren't talking about the first guy or two post-Paul. We are talking about the first 5 centuries after Christ.

Let me repeat that, just so we are clear.

### **Eternal torment was not a pillar of church doctrine for the first 5 centuries after Christ.**

Dr. Ken Vincent, retired psychology professor from Houston Community College, and author of over one hundred books in the fields of psychology and religion, notes:

“ The first person to write about “eternal hell” was the Latin (West) North African Tertullian (160–220 A.D.), who is considered the Father of the Latin Church. As most people reason, hell is a place for people you don't like! Tertullian fantasized that not only the wicked would be in hell but also every philosopher and theologian who ever argued with him! He envisioned a time when he would look down from heaven at those people in hell and laugh with glee! [\[ii\]](#)

Out of the six theological schools in Tertullian's day and beyond (170–430 A.D.), the *only* school that taught the doctrine of eternal torment or hell to its students was the Latin (Roman) school in Carthage, Africa. Four of the other five taught that, through the death and resurrection of Christ, all people would be saved through restorative judgment and reconciliation **in a plan of Ages**.[\[iii\]](#) This teaching was called, “Universal Salvation” or “Universal Reconciliation.” Dr. Vincent says,

“ By far, the main person responsible for making hell eternal in the Western Church was St. Augustine (354–430 CE). Augustine...was made Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He did not know Greek, had tried to study it, but stated that he hated it. Sadly, it is his misunderstanding of Greek that cemented the concept of eternal hell in the Western Church. Augustine not only said that hell was eternal for the wicked, but also for anyone who wasn't a Christian. So complete was his concept of God's exclusion of non-Christians that he considered un-baptized babies as damned. When these babies died, Augustine softened slightly to declare that they would be sent to the “upper level” of hell. Augustine is also the inventor of the concept of “hell Lite,” also known as *Purgatory*, which he developed to accommodate some of the universalist verses in the Bible. Augustine acknowledged the Universalists, whom he called “tender-hearted,” and included them among the “orthodox.”[\[iv\]](#)

Not only was Augustine somewhat the champion of the hell doctrine in the Western Church, he also had a major influence on the onset of religious bigotry and hate campaigns in the following centuries.

In the 1907 book, *Lives of the Fathers: Sketches of Church History in Biography*, written by Frederick D. Farrar, who was Chaplain in Ordinary to the Queen of England, we read about Augustine:

“ The advocacy of hell came primarily on the scene with Augustine: In no other respect did Augustine differ more widely from Origen and the Alexandrians [Eastern Church] than in his intolerant spirit. Even Tertullian conceded to all the right of opinion.

[Augustine] was the first in the long line of Christian persecutors, and illustrates the character of the theology that swayed him in the wicked spirit that impelled him to advocate the right to persecute Christians who differ from those in power. The dark pages that bear the record of subsequent centuries are a damning witness to the cruel spirit that actuated Christians, and the cruel theology that impelled it. Augustine was the first and ablest asserter of the principle which led to Albigensian crusades, Spanish armadas, Netherland's butcheries, St. Bartholomew massacres, the accursed infamies of the Inquisition, the vile espionage, the hideous bale fires of Seville and Smithfield, the racks, the gibbets, the thumbscrews, and the subterranean torture-chambers used by churchly torturers.[v]

Samuel Dawson, author of, *The Teaching of Jesus: From Mount Sinai to Gehenna a Faithful Rabbi Urgently Warns Rebellious Israel*, says:

“ Most of what we believe about hell comes from Catholicism and ignorance of the Old Testament, not from the Bible. I now believe that hell is the invention of Roman Catholicism; and surprisingly, most, if not all, of our popular concepts of hell can be found in the writings of Roman Catholic writers like the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), author of *Dante's Inferno*. The English poet John Milton (1608–1674), author of *Paradise Lost*, set forth the same concepts in a fashion highly acceptable to the Roman Catholic faith. Yet none of our concepts of hell can be found in the teaching of Jesus Christ![vi]

Following on the heels of Augustine, the greatest influence on today's hell theology via most modern Bible translations came from Jerome's *Latin Vulgate*. Jerome translated this tainted version of the Scriptures from a very inferior Latin text in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century:

For over a thousand years (c. AD 400–1530), the Vulgate was the definitive edition of the most influential text in Western European society. Indeed, for most Western Christians, it was the only version of the Bible ever encountered. The Vulgate's influence throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance into the Early Modern Period is even greater than that of the King James Version in English; for Christians during these times the phraseology and wording of the Vulgate permeated all areas of the culture.[vii]

What was the problem with Jerome's Bible? It was heavily influenced by Latin hell-inventing theologians like Tertullian and Augustine.

When you realize that the hell doctrine was so late in being adopted by the Church (and hence, Scriptures), the

poorly constructed walls of orthodoxy begin to crumble. It was several hundred years after Jesus and the apostles that men began formulating many of these new Church doctrines and creeds, many still a part of Evangelical Christian orthodoxy to this day.

Had our old English Bibles been translated directly out of the Greek instead of Latin, it's very probable that the doctrine of eternal torment would never have found its way into our modern Bibles and theology at all. Many of these doctrines were strong-armed into the Church through major dissension and even bloodshed, with intolerant, oppressive Church leaders insisting that they were "led by the Spirit" on such matters.

[ii] Dr. Ken R. Vincent, Ed.D., "The Salvation Conspiracy: How Hell Became Eternal,"

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org/articles/salvationconspiracy.html> (accessed July 1, 2010).

[iii] J.W. Hanson, D.D., *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During its First Five Hundred Years*, (Boston and Chicago: Universalist Publishing House, 1899), & *The Bible Hell*, (1888).

[iv] Dr. Ken R. Vincent, Ed.D., "The Salvation Conspiracy: How Hell Became Eternal,"

<http://www.christianuniversalist.org/articles/salvationconspiracy.html> (accessed July 1, 2010).

[v] Frederick D. Farrar, D.D. F.R.S., Chaplain in Ordinary to the Queen, *Lives of the Fathers: Sketches of Church History in Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1907).

[vi] Samuel G. Dawson and Patsy Rae Dawson, *The Teaching of Jesus From Mount Sinai to Gehenna: A Faithful Rabbi Urgently Warns Rebellious Israel* (SGD Press, June 26, 2009).

[vii] "Vulgate," Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulgate> (accessed June 1, 2011).

[viii] David Daniell, *The Bible in English: its history and influence* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003), 439.

## The Afterlife According To Gregory

While we've been telling you a lot about what early fathers didn't believe, I think it would be helpful for us to look at what some of them did believe.

We are going to look briefly at St. Gregory of Nyssa, who lived from 335 to 395 AD. In addition to being canonized, St. Gregory served as the Bishop of Nyssa and is known for his significant contributions to both the doctrine of the Trinity and the Nicene creed.

In other words, this guy is one of the founding fathers of church orthodoxy. If you aren't aware, the Nicene creed serves to this day as the universal statement of faith for not only the Catholic church, but most anyone who would call themselves "Christians".

St. Gregory **DID NOT believe** in eternal torment. But let's not stop there. What **he DID believe** in was universal salvation – that all would ultimately be reconciled to God.

“ For it is evident that God will in truth be all in all when there shall be no evil in existence, when every created being is at harmony with itself and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; when every creature shall have been made one body.

St. Gregory, like many in his day, believed that we were on a progression through the ages, where at the end of the

Age, those who had purged themselves of evil in this life would enter into the blessedness of the Age to Come, while those who hadn't would be passed through cleansing fire, after which they would also enter into that same blessedness.

“ Whoever considers the divine power will plainly perceive that it is able at length to restore by means of the aionion purging and atoning sufferings, those who have gone even to this extremity of wickedness.

And in another quote:

“ Wherefore, that at the same time liberty of free-will should be left to nature and yet the evil be purged away, the wisdom of God discovered this plan; to suffer man to do what he would, that having tasted the evil which he desired, and learning by experience for what wretchedness he had bartered away the blessings he had, he might of his own will hasten back with desire to the first blessedness ...either being purged in this life through prayer and discipline, or after his departure hence through the furnace of cleansing fire.

In other words, St. Gregory is saying that God gave us free will, so that in tasting evil, we would realize how wretched it is and hasten back into a righteous state of blessedness – or as we might say here at Brazen Church, hasten into the abundant life Jesus came to show us – and that this hastening to blessedness will come either in this life, through prayer and discipline, or in the life to come, by passing through cleansing fire.

This isn't a renegade theologian firing shots at Christendom thousands of years into orthodoxy.

This is a FOUNDER of orthodoxy. This is a man responsible for forging the unifying statement of faith for all of Christianity. This is a man who attended the first ever council of the Church in Nicaea.

And THIS MAN, this founder of the faith, not only shows no traces of a belief in Hell – He actually believed ALL WOULD BE SAVED. And while not all of his contemporaries shared his belief that all would be saved, the opposing belief was that the wicked would be destroyed... NOT tormented forever.

## **We Could Keep Going**

St. Gregory wasn't by any means alone in his ideas. Here are some quotes from other early Church fathers.

From Olympiodorus (495-570 AD):

“ Do not suppose that the soul is punished for endless eons. The soul is not punished to gratify the revenge of the divinity, but for the sake of healing. The soul is punished for an eonian period (aionios) calling its life and its allotted period of punishment its eon.

From Diodorus of Tarsus (320-394 AD):



“ For the wicked there are punishments, not perpetual, however, lest the immortality prepared for them should be a disadvantage, but they are to be purified for a brief period according to the amount of malice in their works. They shall therefore suffer punishment for a short space, but immortal blessedness having no end awaits them...the penalties to be inflicted for their many and grave sins are very far surpassed by the magnitude of the mercy to be showed to them.

From Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 AD):

“ Wherefore also he drove him out of paradise and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some dare assert, but because He pitied him and desired that he should not be immortal and the evil interminable and irremediable.

From St. Jerome (331-420 AD):

“ In the end and consummation of the Universe all are to be restored into their original harmonious state, and we all shall be made one body and be united once more into a perfect man and the prayer of our Savior shall be fulfilled that all may be one.

From Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428 AD):

“ The wicked who have committed evil the whole period of their lives shall be punished till they learn that, by continuing in sin, they only continue in misery. And when, by this means, they shall have been brought to fear God, and to regard Him with good will, they shall obtain the enjoyment of His grace.

From Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD):

“ We can set no limits to the agency of the Redeemer to redeem, to rescue, to discipline in his work, and so will he continue to operate after this life.

We could keep going, but just [click here if you'd like to read more quotes](#).

## Conclusion

It shocks me to hear people argue that the doctrine of Hell has been the definitive belief of Christendom since the days of the New Testament. Such a claim demonstrates a fundamental ignorance of Church history and is a testament to how extensively St. Augustine's doctrine influenced the orthodox church.

The idea of eternal torment comes primarily from Greek thought – a merging of mythology and the ramification of belief in an immortal soul.

For 5 centuries, Christian doctrine remained unaffected by Hell until St. Augustine forcibly inserted it into orthodoxy, using a combination of power and violence to ensure it's survival. Since that time, we've seen the

gradual evolution of Christian doctrine in and around this concept, until today, the average believer has no idea that the concept of eternal torment isn't even Biblical.

This doctrine of Hell has been used for centuries to control the masses with fear. Today, it prevents the world, both Christian and non-Christian alike, from seeing a loving Father.

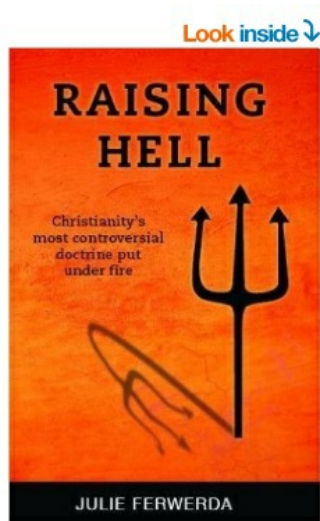
A Christianity with Hell is a Christianity that must inherently be full of fear, and yet [1 John 4:18](#) tells us:

“ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

A Christianity without Hell is a Christianity without fear, and that's the Christianity I hope our series has freed you to enjoy... or at least freed you to consider.

## Thanks For Reading Brazen Church's Very First Ebook!

If you'd like to continue your research on Hell, consider purchasing Julie's book *Raising Hell* (we'd HIGHLY recommend it). [Just click here or the image below to get it in print for \\$11.99 or on Kindle for just \\$2.99!](#)



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Have you ever considered the apparent injustices, inconsistencies, and even contradictions of the doctrine of hell? For starters, do earthly parents love their children more than God? Does God ask you to forgive your enemies when He is not willing to do the same? Is being punished forever for sins committed in a short lifetime really "justice"? Does everybody really get the same fair chance to believe in Jesus before they die? If hell is the worst possible fate of mankind, and if God is truly loving, then...

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