

# C H R I S T I A N I T Y and A T H E I S M

## 5. Hell

### Introduction

At Atheists Online you can find all sorts of T-shirts with anti-Christian slogans such as this one: "Silly Christian, hell is for Kids." Unfortunately the topic of "Hell and Eternal Punishment" is no joke. Many, many atheists consider this one of their primary reasons for rejecting the God of the Bible. This rejection is also one of the important teachings of Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many humanistic Christians.

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### Development of the Argument

Ancient Civilizations – the Babylonians and Egyptians both believed in an afterlife. In some cases death was "neutral." It was a kind of "pallid, half-life, without either reward or punishment" (*The History of Hell*, by Allen E. Bernstein). In other cases there was a "moral" view that included punishments. Plato spoke of an after-life that included four fates ranging from eternal rewards or eternal punishments.



Middle Ages - The doctrine of Hell and Eternal Punishment was extremely popular in the Medieval Church. The concept of hell was dramatically portrayed in literature and plays (Dante's *Inferno*).

Modern View – Many people today reject the idea of hell as inhumane: "There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that he believed in hell.

I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment" (*Why I Am Not a Christian*, Bertrand Russell, p. 17).

### Logical Response

When a person rejects the Bible's teaching of hell, we can ask, "what do you put in it's place?" There are two options usually mentioned:

Annihilationism – This is a very popular view that simply says either all people or just the “wicked” are destroyed at death. This approach is logically consistent with the philosophy of “nihilism,” so any argument against it would be an argument similar to that against nihilism. We believe that there is a moral significance to life that transcends the material. Such a view makes us nothing more than animals and calls into question and sense of purpose or justice.

Universalism – This is the teaching that all “go to heaven” in one way or another. This view is inconsistent with the idea of human freedom. What if some simply do not want to live eternally with God?

## Biblical Response

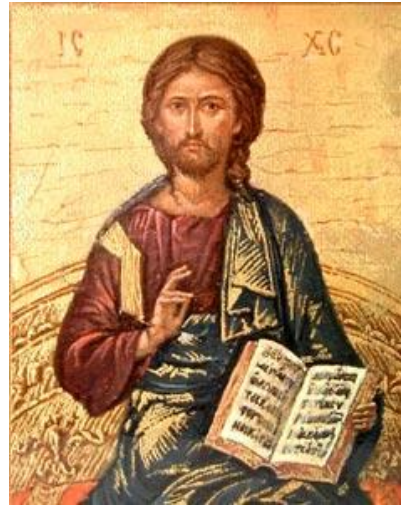
### The Basic Bible Teaching –

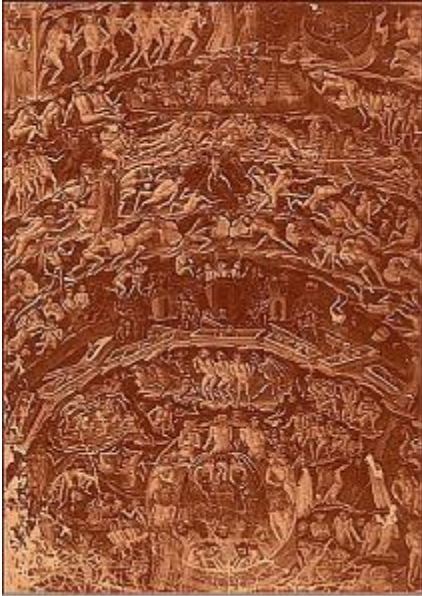
Matthew 23.33 Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?

2 Thessalonians 1.9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power...

Mark 9.43-48 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -- <sup>44</sup> "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' <sup>45</sup> "And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -- <sup>46</sup> "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' <sup>47</sup> "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, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire -- <sup>48</sup> "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.'

Matthew 8.12 But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.





A Word of Caution – As regards the question whether the fire of hell (*Mt 25:41 et al.*) is a material fire or not, restraint is in order. Since other expressions are used to depict the suffering of the lost (*e.g.*, “their worm does not die,” *Mk 9:48*; they “shall be cast out into outer darkness,” *Mt 8:12*), all of them may well be understood figuratively. The description that the Bible gives of hell is to express in terms taken from human experience the unspeakable torments of body and soul of the damned. Whatever has been said about the awful doom of the wicked is intended to call sinners to repentance and warn them of the wrath to come. (*The Lutheran*

*Cyclopedia* [www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/](http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/))

The Seriousness of Sin – One of the reasons people reject the doctrine of hell is because they do not consider sin to be that serious of a problem. However the doctrine of hell cannot be judged by man’s low opinion of sin. Thomas Aquinas presented one of the simplest arguments defending the doctrine of hell when he said,

The magnitude of the punishment matches the magnitude of the sin... Now a sin that is against God is infinite; the higher the person against whom it is committed, the graver the sin – it is more criminal to strike the head of state than a private citizen – and God is of infinite greatness. Therefore an infinite punishment is deserved for a sin committed against him. (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae. 25)

### Questions and Answers from “The Lutheran Hour”

LUTHERAN HOUR MAILBOX (Questions & Answers) for March 20, 2005  
Topic: Is God Cruel to Condemn?

ANNOUNCER: Now Pastor Ken Klaus answers questions from listeners. I'm Mark Eischer. Today's question is really very simple - "Can a person be saved after they die?"

KLAUS: God is patient and the Holy Spirit is always calling sinners to repentance and faith. But if a sinner rejects God's grace during his time here on earth, once he dies, it's too late. Now I realize, to some people that seems cruel. They might ask, "How can a God of love do that to someone who is innocent?"

ANNOUNCER: There's enough material there for a whole month's worth of Q&As.

KLAUS: It is that. First let's say that God would never send an innocent person to hell. The fact is, from God's perspective, nobody is innocent. We all are sinners. The Bible says, "There's not a just person on the earth that always does good, and never sins" (Eccl. 7:20). The truth is, all of us have broken God's laws. So, although it would be cruel for God to send an innocent person to hell, it's sort of a moot point because no one fits that description.

ANNOUNCER: Still, some would say it's cruel for a God of love to send anybody to hell.

KLAUS: And I would ask them, how about Hitler and Stalin?

ANNOUNCER: Good question. But what about those people who have tried to lead a good life?

KLAUS: Then the question really is, how good is good enough? Again, if you agree that God is justified in sending certain people to hell, then it's just a matter of where you're going to draw the line. You know, Mark, I also think it's a very dangerous thing for people to call the Lord cruel. That's an adjective that just doesn't apply to Him.

ANNOUNCER: Why not?

KLAUS: A cruel God would not have set our first ancestors in the Garden of Eden where they had a perfect life. No tears, no problems, no pain, no death - that's not the work of a cruel God.

ANNOUNCER: But humankind fell into sin by disobeying God.

KLAUS: Here's the synopsis of what happened. God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed. There was only one very small, easily followed law - don't eat from the fruit of this one particular tree. That's not complicated; it's not cruel; there were no hidden clauses in that arrangement. God said, "Do what you want, eat what you want, just stay away from the tree. Don't eat from it." Sadly,

our first parents couldn't do it because they didn't believe what God said. They doubted His word. They did the one thing they were warned not to do, and they along with all who have come after, are subject to death and deserve to be punished eternally.

ANNOUNCER: Is that where God gets cruel - at least the way some people think?

KLAUS: I suppose so, but cruel still doesn't describe the Lord. He's not cruel. He's fair and just and gracious and merciful. Immediately following our sin, God gave a promise, a way for us to be saved to escape damnation. He said He would send His Son who would take our place. He would take our place by living a perfect life. He would take our place by avoiding every kind of temptation. He would take our place by suffering and dying for us. He would take our place by carrying our sins. Having given His promise, God said, "Turn from your sins, believe that Jesus is your Substitute, and you will be saved." That isn't cruel.

ANNOUNCER: No, actually it's mercy and grace we don't deserve.

KLAUS: That's the picture Scripture paints. Here's the rest of it - we're in prison for our sins. God, our Judge, sent His innocent Son into our prison to take our place. Jesus took our punishment and then rose from the dead. In this way, He unlocked our jail cells. He sent His followers out to tell people that they're free. Now, if somebody doesn't hear that they're free, that's not the Judge's fault. You can't say that the Judge who sacrificed his innocent son for guilty jailbirds is cruel. If people stay put in themselves, you can't blame the Judge for that either. If people laugh at the idea of freedom; if they say "no Judge would do that, there must be a catch," that's not the Judge's fault. If the cell is relocked, which is basically what will happen on Judgment Day, you can't blame the Judge for not giving people yet another chance. You can't say, "He's cruel." He's done far more than anyone thought any Judge should.

ANNOUNCER: So, getting back to the question that started this discussion, there is no second chance to believe?

KLAUS: None. Let me say, there's a lot of Scriptural passages that support what I've said today. But here's one that sums it up. From Hebrews 9:27, it reads this way: "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." Let's close by saying, "Now is the day of salvation. God is calling unbelievers right now. Look to Jesus, trust in Him, and live."

ANNOUNCER: Thank you, Pastor Klaus. This has been a presentation of Lutheran Hour Ministries.

