

Does God Sentence People to an Eternity of Punishment in Hell?

By David L. Miner

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Does God sentence people to an eternity of punishment in hell?

Many people ask this question. In fact, millions have asked this question over the past 2,000 years, and even longer. Some have asked out of fear; some because they do not know. Many have asked because they would seek to condemn, or at least reject, a God who would torture people for an eternity FOR ANY REASON at all, but especially those people refused to kneel down and worship him.

So how about it? Does God sentence people to eternal torture just because they would not do exactly what he demands?

The first thing that must be settled is the fact that we are dealing with a Biblical concept so we will look for the answers in the Bible. It would be a little foolish, and MORE than a little dishonest, if we ask a biblical question and then look for the answer in the Koran or the Encyclopedia Britannica or in some autobiography of a famous actor or some other writing. If we ask a question about a Biblical concept, then we are intellectually and philosophically limited to the Bible for an answer to the question.

In other words, let's say the Bible DOES claim that God will send anyone who doesn't totally obey him to spend an eternity in torture.

If we can find an acceptable explanation in ANY OTHER WRITING, we can *claim* we have the option of embracing that answer and putting the matter to rest.

But would the matter STAY at rest? I mean, really? For most people, there would always be questions; like, "If God really meant THAT, then why didn't he put it in the Bible?" or, "If God really meant THAT, then why did it take thousands of years to let us know? Isn't that torture in itself? Letting millions of people die in fear of their eternity, yet knowing all the time that the answer would get written in the Twentieth Century: only a cruel God would do that!"

ADMIT IT! No matter what answer you come up with, no matter how much sense it makes to you, ANY ANSWER to this question that does not come from the Bible will bring up many more questions. Face it: only God can come up with an acceptable answer to this question, and the Bible is the only acceptable place to put that answer. If God is going to put that THREAT in the Bible, then God *must* put the EXPLANATION in the Bible, too.

So feel free to look anywhere else you want for the answer to this question, but I will take the time to look at only the Bible for the answer and no where else. In other words, you can read anyone's conjecture ABOUT the Bible, or you can read the Bible.

And the answer is not a simple or short response. If you ask a deep question about an eternal issue, one about which thousands of pages of text has been written over thousands of years, and you want a short yes/no answer... Well, don't you think that is kind of stupid? You asked a serious question about a serious issue, and

you will get a serious answer. Deal with it! After all, one way or another, this is YOUR eternity we are talking about!

The concept of hell was ambiguously present in what Christians call the Old Testament, the first two-thirds of the Christian Bible. The Jews would refer to these writings as the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. The libraries of Christians and Jews alike have many, many books and essays and theological papers on hell, but both have very little Scripture on it. [SEE NOTE #1]

The Christian New Testament has more on the topic, and it is more specific, but most of the individual references, both Old and New Testament, are still somewhat incomplete. In other words, it takes putting them all together into a composite description before you can actually get a picture of hell. But first, we need to tell a story in order to get the "big picture" so the smaller snapshots will make more sense.

So, let's start way back at the beginning; and the beginning was way back before the universe was created.

Before God created anything, he had a PLAN. He wanted a being besides himself for fellowship and companionship for the rest of eternity. We don't know how long he waited to implement this PLAN, because we don't have any calendar to measure the first part of eternity, eternity past. Or the second part of eternity, eternity future, for that matter. Anyway, it was a long time ago, if we can even use the word "time" in this part of the discussion. Also, I don't intend to say that God NEEDED our fellowship, or that he WANTED our fellowship; there are many books of theology to address that question. You are on your own for that. I merely want to say that God DECIDED to have our fellowship. God DECIDED

to create a being that had an eternal part, an eternal aspect of his being, that would last for eternity. Stick with me here; this is important.

According to the Bible, only God, angelic beings, and mankind, will be around for the rest of eternity. [SEE NOTE #2]

Of course, many people want to think that their dogs will be in heaven for eternity, too, and I kind of like that idea. But those who talk about "doggie heaven" with everyone don't talk about "doggie hell" with anyone. So we are still going to restrict our discussion to just God, angelic beings, and mankind.

So God DECIDED to create mankind. And he decided to create an entire universe as mankind's playground, and a beautiful planet for mankind to live on. And then he created his masterpiece: mankind. Note that God created mankind in two models - male and female. There were probably many reasons why God created a male and female version of mankind, but the first reason given in the Bible was so that mankind would reflect the image of God. Apparently it took a male and a female version of mankind in order to get enough of God reflected to satisfy him. Maybe that means that Adam by himself was not God's image as so many people have taught for so many years; maybe creating mankind in God's image required creating a male and female in fellowship. But again, you can argue about that on your own time.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let THEM rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over the creatures that move along the ground." So God

created man in his image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. [Genesis 1:26-27, New International Version]

Some people think it was a little wasteful for God to create an entire universe just for a single planet of people. But when you can do ANYTHING you want to do, does it really matter?

And some people believe God created such a huge universe because he wanted to create more than one planet full of people. But when you can do anything you want, does it really matter?

So, to get back to the issue, God created mankind with an eternal spirit, and he placed mankind in a beautiful garden full of good things to eat, plenty of sunshine, a VERY limited wardrobe, and HBO.

Hold it! Don't interrupt me! I can tell just by looking at you that you are about to claim Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden are just a story and you don't believe it. And I would say that the Bible presents the story as if it is true, and key figures all through the Bible, including Jesus, all speak of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden as if they existed. So I have a question for you: If you are going to cut out part of the Bible just because you don't believe that part, then why don't you cut out the parts about hell and save me a lot of trouble here?

Still here? Okay, you have just covered our second ground rule. The first rule is that we limit the material for our answers to the facts and material in the Bible. The second rule is that we accept ALL of the Bible and we don't cut out parts just because we don't or can't

believe in those parts. If we start down that trail, we finish only when we run out of White-Out!

And the third rule is WE DON'T INTERRUPT THE STORY! All righty, then; let's move on.

But first let me comment on what you were about to bring up. Do you think you are the first to claim there is a part of the Bible you can't believe? Come on, man! Think about it! We are talking about *eternity* here; infinity in every way possible. And we are talking about God. GOD! That means we HAVE to talk about the impossible! Do you think IMPOSSIBLE is a problem with an infinite God?

Seriously, do you think an eternal hell is POSSIBLE?

If you think an eternal hell is impossible, and you don't believe in the impossible, then why are we wasting time here? Let's blow this discussion and go watch something that is the perfect example of possible: like all the unbelievably stupid people on these "He did my girlfriend so I am going to do his mom" talk shows. I mean, is it possible that there are REALLY that many people stupid enough to fill so many episodes? And do you think there are REALLY that many people stupid enough to WATCH all those shows?

Or, if you want impossible that we can all "see," let's look at light. If you *can* look at light, that is. Scientists tell us that light is a wave of energy in a particular series of wavelengths. Yet they admit that light is also a particle of matter they call a photon. So light is at the same time BOTH a wave of energy AND a particle of matter. And, YES, scientists tell us that is impossible. But impossible doesn't

stop them from soaking up millions of dollars of tax money each year to study *impossible*.

So DO YOU REALLY THINK IMPOSSIBLE STOPS GOD?

We are talking about a supernatural God and an eternal hell, and you want to tell me you don't believe in Adam and Eve and a special garden because it is IMPOSSIBLE?

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." [Matthew 19:26, NIV]

Now, I told you about interrupting the story!

So God created mankind in his own image by creating a male and a female. And being in his image means, IN PART, that mankind will live forever with God. And God put mankind in a special garden facing endless possibilities. All God asked was one tiny thing.

And mankind blew it! Eve said, "The devil made me do it!" and Adam said, "May I remind you, God, that it was *your* idea to bring Eve into the game. I was doing just fine without her." And God said, "ENOUGH!" and there was silence for a moment. "I gave you a fantastic playground where you could do anything you wanted. I put the most handsome man in the world with the most beautiful woman on the planet. And I gave you everything you needed to eat so you would never have to work for your dinner. And I gave you ONE RULE! Only one thing in all the world were you told to not do! And as soon as I turned my back, what did you do? YOU BROKE MY ONE RULE!

"Adam, you have no idea the repercussions, the ripple effect, your decision is going to have. You have made a horrible impact on all of creation! I created mankind so that ALL MANKIND would enjoy an eternity in heaven with me. EVERYONE who came from your union would have spent an eternity where there was nothing but perfection. EVERY GENERATION of mankind until I stop the clock would have spent a small amount of time on this perfect planet, and then would have gone to spend eternity with me in a perfect heaven.

"But you blew it for everyone, Adam. No, you didn't surprise me. No, your decision was not unexpected. But you DID disappoint me, Adam. I had intended for ALL mankind to spend eternity in heaven with me. YOU just made that impossible! Someday, you will understand what your decision to disobey me will do to the rest of mankind."

So God kicked Adam and Eve out of that special garden into a world where they would have to struggle and experience all sorts of problems. And it was a VERY imperfect world from that point forward.

But God continued to follow his PLAN to spend eternity with as many of mankind as possible.

You see, God already had to deal with some of his angelic beings. They broke God's Rules, too. [SEE NOTE #3]

So God had created what we call heaven, a place of perfection where absolutely nothing imperfect can enter. And God sealed heaven against imperfection for all eternity. Nothing imperfect will

EVER be able to go to heaven. God will be in heaven for eternity, and as many people as God can gather will be there, too.

But everyone and everything that God CANNOT gather to himself and take to heaven will have to remain in an imperfect universe, forever separated from God, forever separated from everything wonderful and good and perfect. [SEE NOTE #4]

But back to the PLAN...

So God chose a particular group of people, a tribe directly descended from a man he liked, named Abraham, as the people he would honor and bless in ways no other people in all of history would be honored and blessed. The catch? All they had to do was obey ten simple rules. And what happened? The people blew it.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us a god who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." [Exodus 32:1, NIV]

So God created a new and much larger set of rules. This time the set of rules had two purposes. One purpose was to show mankind just how serious disobedience was to God. God created a spiritual law that required a blood sacrifice for every sin. Someone sinned and something had to die. Then he set up a series of feast days, holy days that the people had to observe, to make the sacrifices more endurable. The second purpose was to show the people how to live. Or more specifically, how God's Chosen People should live in order to demonstrate: 1) their love for God, 2) their love toward the rest of God's Chosen People, and 3) to show God's love for all

people everywhere. This was a sort of "First and foremost, LOVE ME. And then follow the rest of the rules as if they were normal actions springing out of that love. In addition, there are things you will need to do, sacrifices, that will make amends for messing up. If you LOVE me, and if you LIVE like you love me, and if you FOLLOW these steps to establish the fellowship that I wanted all along, then everything will be fine."

After all, God wanted to make it clear that he loved his chosen people in a special way. And if he made it clear how he wanted them to live in response to his love, then they would naturally want to please him, and they would live just exactly how he wanted them to live. Right?

And what was this system of rules? It was very simple. In order to repair the damage that Adam caused to all of creation, in order to spend an eternity in heaven with God, YOU HAD TO BE PERFECT! That's all there was to it! [SEE NOTE #5]

"But," you exclaim, "NO ONE is perfect!" And you are exactly right. But God has a PLAN for that, too. So stop interrupting!

As I was saying, the people exercised their self-will anyway. Obedience became limited to certain actions God demanded and the love of God was all but ignored. They cut some corners. They bent some of the rules. Other rules they just plain broke. The rules about a blood sacrifice became so twisted that many people lived like they wanted to live and counted on those sacrifices to make them acceptable in God's eyes. It got so bad that they had a group of people, a sort of religious police force they called the Pharisees, whose primary function was to wander around and watch for people ignoring or breaking the rules. In other words, the people just didn't

measure up to what God wanted from them. Jesus himself pointed out the problem of that time: the Pharisees may have been the most OBEDIENT of the people, but even they weren't good enough to spend eternity in heaven with God.

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. [Matthew 5:20, NIV]

But God was waiting for just the right time to open the next part of his PLAN. This part involved a Perfect Sacrifice, a sacrifice that didn't just cover up the sins of the people that were committed since the last sacrifice. This was a Perfect Sacrifice that paid for, actually MADE RIGHTEOUS, the people who had sinned. This Perfect Sacrifice would change the people back into what mankind started out to be - without sin.

This Perfect Sacrifice MADE the people perfect in God's eyes.
[SEE NOTE #6]

But this Perfect Sacrifice was going to be the most PAINFUL sacrifice in all eternity. A Perfect Sacrifice was going to take more than just a lamb without blemish. It would take a Lamb that was, well, PERFECT! This Perfect Sacrifice would take nothing less than the sinless Son of God.

This blood sacrifice that would be a perfect and eternal sacrifice, a sacrifice that would not need to be repeated at feast after feast, that would NEVER need to be repeated again - EVER - would have to be Jesus.

And this Perfect Sacrifice wouldn't just COVER UP sin, but actually PAY the penalty required, the blood sacrifice required, for sins so those same sins could be forgiven.

FORGIVEN! You see, forgiven is the flip side of perfect. Forgiven is where God no longer sees your sins. You have heard it said, "Love is blind!" This is how God turns FORGIVEN into something practical:

When you have been forgiven and God looks at you, he doesn't see your sins.

When you have been forgiven and God looks at you, he sees a sinless, a PERFECT, person.

And because of that, God can invite you into his heaven for eternity.

And what is the catch? All you have to do is accept that Perfect Sacrifice as the one and only sacrifice for your sins. Believe it and accept it. Of course, you can't really believe it and keep on living the way you had been living. But that was part of God's PLAN, too. If you truly believe this Perfect Sacrifice can deal with sin in a way that mankind cannot deal with it, and if you accept this Perfect Sacrifice to pay for the sins you personally have committed over your life, then God agrees to overlook your sins, agrees to let love blind him concerning your sins, and he will invite you to spend eternity with him in heaven after you die.

That's all there was to it.

So let's ask the question again:

DOES GOD SEND PEOPLE TO SPEND AN ETERNITY OF PUNISHMENT IN HELL?

And this is God's answer:

*I gave mankind one simple rule. **You blew it!***

*Then I gave you ten simple rules. **You blew it!***

*Then I gave you detailed rules so clear that even an idiot studying to be a moron could follow them. **You blew it!***

*Then I gave you a system of sacrifices that would cover your sins committed since the last sacrifice just to show you how serious this sin business really is, so you could make sure you were in right standing before God. **You still blew it!***

*I gave my own Perfect Son as a once and for all sacrifice with only one requirement: that you believe it and accept by faith that this Perfect Sacrifice will pay the penalty for your sin and rebellion. **And you blew it once again!***

I have done EVERYTHING I CAN FOR YOU! All you have to do is make a choice.

And you still blow it!

Yet you blame me! You claim I SEND people to hell for an eternity because of some silly mistakes on their part.

SORRY, MAN! IT'S YOUR CHOICE! I say again: IT'S YOUR CHOICE! I DON'T SEND ANYONE TO HELL!

You can choose to put your faith in my Perfect Sacrifice as payment for your sins, and stop depending on your own efforts and your own goodness for that payment, and you can spend an eternity in heaven with me.

Or you can choose to go your own way.

In other words, it is my way or the Highway to Hell!

BUT NO ONE GOES TO HELL UNLESS THEY CHOOSE TO GO TO HELL! SO DON'T BLAME ME!

<p>This is God's answer to the question. So let me ask, are you going to blow it, too?</p>

NOTE #1:

The Old Testament uses several Hebrew words that apparently mean what we now call HELL. The subject is sort of "danced around" with many vague comments that seem to MEAN hell. *SHEOL* and *GAHENNA* are the most commonly used Hebrew words before the time of Jesus. By the time the New Testament writers came along, the Greek word *HADES* had become the standard or "catch-all" word, from which we derive our English word hell. But Old Testament or New Testament, Hebrew words or Greek, hell ALWAYS signified a place you REALLY DID NOT WANT TO GO!

The wicked return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. [Psalm 9:17, NIV]

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to Sheol, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. [Psalm 16:9-10, NIV]

The cords of death entangle me, the anguish of Sheol came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. [Psalm 116:3, NIV]

In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus at his side. [Luke 16:23, NIV]

NOTE #2:

God needs no explanation, but *Angelic Beings* might need a few words. This is a general term for created beings who have supernatural powers and will live from their creation until "eternity future." Within this general term are a whole host of different categories. We have absolutely no clue as to the numbers in each category, but some Scriptures seem to suggest thousands of each exist. Among the Angelic Beings in Scripture are angels, cherubim, seraphim, military forces, and even a group called *council members*. No, don't ask me to explain any of these beings, but examples in Scripture include:

So the Lord banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. [Genesis 3:23-24, NIV]

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haraan. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. [Genesis 28:10-12, NIV]

God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgment among the "gods." [Psalm 82:12, NIV]

For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord? Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings? In the council of

the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him. [Psalm 89:6-7, NIV]

But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear his word? [Jeremiah 23:18, NIV]

Did you listen in on God's council? [Job 15:8, NIV]

Micaiah continued, "Therefore, hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. And the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramath Giliad and going to his death there?' One suggested this and another suggested that. Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the Lord and said, 'I will entice him.' 'By what means?' the Lord asked. 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said. 'You will succeed in enticing him,' said the Lord. 'Go and do it.'" [1 Kings 22:19-22, NIV]

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. [Joshua 5:13-15, NIV]

This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearance of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. [II Timothy 1:9-10, NIV]

NOTE #3:

Lucifer was a real bigwig in the angelic realm; so big he had his own nickname: Morning Star. He was so powerful he believed that he only needed a little more and he would be equal to God. So he gathered a large group of his fellow angels and staged a rebellion.

Lucifer became renamed as Satan and lost, and he and one-third of the angels were tossed out of heaven, because of God's rule that sin and rebellion cannot abide in heaven.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down - that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

[Revelation 12:7-9, NIV]

How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit.

[Isaiah 14:12-15, NIV]

NOTE #4

Again, God created heaven so that he had someplace eternal where he could spend the rest of eternity with the angelic beings and the human beings he had created. When Satan and his followers lost his rebellion, they were thrown out of heaven. When Adam and Eve rebelled, mankind became infected with sin, and it was passed down from one generation to another. Before Adam and Eve disobeyed, all mankind was destined to spend eternity with God in heaven. AFTER Adam sinned, only people who individually chose to have God deal with their sin and who chose to remain in fellowship with God would be allowed in heaven. The rest would be allowed to pursue their choice - apart from God.

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment . . . then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment. [II Peter 4 and 9, NIV]

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. Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then

death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. [Revelation 20:7-15, NIV]

NOTE #5

Remember that heaven was for God to spend the rest of eternity with mankind, AND that no sin or rebellion was to be allowed in heaven. Satan and his angels rebelled and were thrown out of heaven. So for any man or woman to be invited to heaven, that man or woman had to be without sin, had to be perfect. Heaven has a seal around it that will not allow sin to pass through.

Follow peace with all men, and be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. [Hebrews 12:14, NIV]

May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. [I Thessalonians 3:13, NIV]

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. [Ephesians 1:4, NIV]

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." [I Peter 4:15-16, NIV]

NOTE #6

You say, and I agree, that no man is PERFECT. Yet God REQUIRES us to be perfect if we are to go to heaven. But the flipside of PERFECT is FORGIVEN, and it is just as good in God's eyes. And God offers forgiveness to all people. God is doing his part to reconcile a relationship that was originally intended to be eternal, but has been broken.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, not counting men's sins against them. [II Corinthians 3:18-19, NIV]

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for our but also for the sins of the whole world. [I John 2:2, NIV]

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation - if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the Gospel.
[Colossians 1:21-23, NIV]

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