

HEAVEN AND HELL TERMINAL PUNISHMENT

Douglas Jacoby, 1991

Introduction

In my view **hell doesn't last infinitely**, but instead **destroys** the individual after an appropriate length of time. Hell is eternal in its *consequences*, not in its *duration*. This is in contrast to the "traditional view," which holds that the individual is tormented endlessly in the fire of hell. In other words, God prolongs one's life infinitely for the purpose of punishment. "Terminal punishment" describes this view. Any length of time in hell less than infinite implies the terminal view.

If you conceive of eternal punishment as lasting millions and millions of years, you are in basic agreement with my thesis. Even 500 million years, as long as that may seem, is virtually *nothing* in comparison with infinite time.) Any amount of time less than forever (infinitely) implies the *terminal* view, as the following table illustrates. In the next world (in what we call eternity) we may be entering a timeless state which defies chronological analysis. Nevertheless, the table may be a useful tool.

TIME AND ETERNITY

Time in hell View of punishment

None (instantly extinguished)	Annihilationist
One million years	Terminal
One week	Terminal
One year	Terminal
Ten days	Terminal
One second	Terminal
Eight and one half minutes	Terminal
Two years	Terminal
Five hundred billion years	Terminal
Four hours	Terminal
Seven trillion years	Terminal
Seven trillion centuries	Terminal
Seven trillion millennia	Terminal
Infinite time	Traditional

Hopefully the difference between traditional and terminal understandings is clear. The terminal view is simply that after a period of torment ("corporal punishment") suited to the individual, God destroys him/her ("capital punishment"). The distinction can also be understood by the following paradigm:

Traditional view:	(Infinite) corporal punishment
Annihilationist view:	Capital punishment
Terminal view:	Corporal + capital punishment

In addition to terminal punishment, I also hold that **the soul of man is not eternal**. Immortality is a gift only for the saved. These two doctrines – the mortality of the soul and the finite nature of hell – are central to the terminal view of hell, especially since the development of this article in the early '90s.

The right attitude

I realize many sincerely hold to the traditional position, while a number have been persuaded to the terminal view. At this point there's no consensus, though a show of hands might result in the triumph of the traditional view. But truth isn't determined by show of hands or popular referendum. What's needed is

a thorough study of the issue. We need to study what the inspired Word of God says. My aim is not a dogmatic pronouncement on the subject (Acts 15-style), but rather a diligent search into the truth of the matter. The issue isn't what *feels* right, or what *works* best, but what the truth is. I hope the paper is helpful to you as you study the matter for yourself.

I. OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

Let's be a little unorthodox and consider some of the objections before we even develop the thesis. This is helpful because of the emotionally loaded nature of any discussion on eternal punishment. Preconceptions eventually need to be addressed. (As long as the person has "the sinner's prayer" or "the thief on the cross" in the back of his mind as an objection to getting baptized, you'll be limited in your ability to persuade him. Show him there's another feasible interpretation, and his mind opens up to the possibility.) The question is, "Is it even *possible* to consider another view of hell?"

A. Jesus' words in Mark 9

What about Jesus' own words on hell? Jesus is in fact the Bible's main spokesman on the subject. Do his words refute the terminal view, or is there another reasonable way to look at the subject?

Mark 9.43-49

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. Everyone will be salted with fire.

Mark 9 seems to imply that the wicked will forever burn in the fire of hell. Similarly, John 3.16 seems to support salvation by faith alone. After all, it states that "whoever *believes* in him would not perish." But then Luke 13.5, supplying additional information, shows that we must *repent* in order not to perish. Surprisingly, a closer look at Mark 9 hardly proves that the wicked burn forever and ever. The Old Testament quotation at the end of the passage turns out to be a direct citation from Isaiah.

Notice that Mark 9 doesn't explicitly say *people* in hell are undying. (The only "immortal" creatures in the passage are the worms!) And anyway, an eternal fire wouldn't logically necessitate whatever is thrown into it would burn eternally, only that the fire wouldn't go out. Whatever is thrown into that fire would sooner or later be completely burned up. It's a *consuming* fire. Likewise, the "unquenchable fire" of Jeremiah 17.27; it does *not* burn forever, though the destruction it wreaks is certainly serious and thorough. Let's carefully consider the Isaiah passage which Jesus cites:

Isaiah 66.23-24

"...All mankind will come and bow down before me," says the Lord. "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will become loathsome to all mankind."

What does this passage, borrowed by Jesus illustrate the nature of hell, really teach?

- The bodies are dead, not living. They're unconscious.
- They are those who rebelled against God.
- They are being consumed by worms and fire.
- The scene evokes feelings of disgust, not pity.

Whether we should take the immortality of the worms literally is certainly questionable. But the thrust of the passage is clear enough: the rebels have been destroyed. They aren't conscious. They feel no pain.

Furthermore, the emotional panorama is different to the one conjured up by the traditional view. The sight is disgusting. No feelings of *pity* are welling up, only loathing and *disgust*. After all, they're dead and decaying. Has Jesus perhaps changed the original meaning of the passage? The burden of proof is on the traditional view, which Isaiah 66 and Mark 9, *naturally* read, do not convincingly support. There certainly seems to be a case for the terminal view here. I'm not asking you to accept the new view just yet, only to admit that the objection from Mark 9 isn't conclusive. Isaiah 66 counts against the traditional view. We may assume everyone in Jesus' day understood him to mean *infinite* torment. But the support for this is weaker than we may think. It comes primarily from the Apocrypha.

The first time the *Apocrypha* (c.200 BC-100 AD) speaks of eternal torment is in the book of Judith, written approximately 125 BC:

Judith 16.17

Woe to the nations that rise up against my race. The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment, to put fire and worms in their flesh. And they shall weep and feel their pain for ever.

BIBLICAL WORDS CONCERNING ETERNITY

<i>Word</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<i>Aion</i>	Greek	Age (aeon): a segment or period of time.
<i>Aionios</i>	Greek	Eternal; relating to an aion. No necessary implication of infinity.
<i>Aevum</i>	Latin	Age – same as Greek aion
<i>Aeternus</i>	Latin	Lasting, eternal
<i>'Olam</i>	Hebrew	Age, period of time, forever

Whereas Isaiah's fire and worms *destroy* the individual, Judith's fire and worms *torture*. What a contrast! This is the one clear passage in support of the traditional view from the Apocrypha. Other apocryphal passages on the subject support the view that the wicked will be destroyed, *not* tormented forever. Even the later *Pseudepigrapha* has a mixed witness on this subject, some passages in favor of the later view, others favoring the traditional view. The *Dead Sea Scrolls*, from the two centuries before Christ, unanimously teach the extinction of the wicked.

To be fair, it should be admitted that some Patristic writers (Church Fathers in the first few centuries after Christ) do follow Judith, but we must remember that (1) their writings date from after the close of the New Testament canon, (2) Jesus gives no credence to the (Old Testament) apocryphal writings, and (3) these books lack biblical authority, since we can hardly decide our views based on extra-biblical sources.

B. The meaning of "eternal" in Matthew 25

If it can be shown that "eternal" is used in more than one way, then there's a case for the terminal view. But *can* it in fact be taken in only one way? The familiar conclusion to the parable of the sheep and goats reads, "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." At first inspection the passage seems to support the traditional view strongly. The reasoning is simple: if the eternal life lasts forever, then the eternal punishment must last equally long. Therefore hell is forever. Settled! And that does sound logical.

Alas, there are good reasons to reject this interpretation. To begin with, it doesn't fit very well with Mark 9, if our analysis above is correct. The first passage assumes that consciousness has ceased, the other, it is alleged, assumes consciousness is unending. Then there's a logical problem. *Why* would someone be tortured *forever* in hell for sins committed during a *limited* period of time on earth? God rewards to the *thousandth* generation, but punishes only to the *third or fourth* (Exodus 20.5-6). This is the Bible's own commentary on the unchanging character of God (Malachi 3.6). But the most important argument against

the traditional view of Matthew 25 is the evidence from Jude. Yes, the little letter of Jude, brother of Jesus.

Jude 7

In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

Go back to Genesis 19. Or go to the geographical area of Sodom and Gomorrah. Did the combustion continue after the fire and brimstone fell? Is it still burning today? So how exactly were they "an example of those who suffer the punishment of *eternal* fire"? Is Jude confused? (And was Peter confused in 2 Peter 2.6?)

Actually, in the scriptures Sodom and Gomorrah are the prototype of those who suffer God's wrath and punishment (Genesis 19.24-29; Lamentations 4.6; Deuteronomy 29.22-24; Amos 4.11; Isaiah 1.9; Zephaniah 2.9; 13.19-22; Luke 17.28-29; Jeremiah 49.18, 50.40; 2 Peter 2.6). Yet in every one of these cases, as with the original (Sodom), the punishment is *limited* in duration! Now back to the question of the meaning of "eternal" in Matthew 25.46. How could hell be eternal *without* lasting forever? It could be eternal *in its effects*. The result of punishment is total, irreversible, eternal. In eternity the verdict will forever read the same. Before reacting against this interpretation of the word "eternal" as special pleading, consider several passages that are à propos:

Hebrews 6.2 speaks of "*eternal judgment*." Is the process of judging itself eternal, or only the consequence, the sentence? It's obvious in this verse "eternal" is being used to describe the effects, *not* the act of judging itself. (Incidentally, eternal judgment, which is the subject of this paper, is one of the "elementary teachings." All the more reason to figure this out.)

Mark 3.29 mentions an "*eternal sin*." Its guilt will never be forgiven. But it isn't the sin itself (as an action) that's eternal. The sin isn't committed for ever and ever, but the results of the sin are everlasting. It will never be forgiven.

Hebrews 9.12 speaks of the "*eternal redemption*" that Christ has effected. Hebrews, of all N.T. books, makes it clear that the redeeming itself is a once-for-all event. So we're speaking of the results or consequences of the redemption Jesus Christ has purchased for us. His atoning death is over; now he is resurrected and at the right hand of the Father. What can we conclude from these three passages?

- In all three cases above the word "eternal" is *not* used in the usual, more familiar way. So "eternal" can be understood in more than one way.
- In Matthew 25.46 there's no compelling reason to take "eternal" in the traditional way. The language and interpretational possibilities don't demand it.
- Jude 7 supports the terminal view against the traditional view. Matthew 25 by no means forces us to accept the traditional view! We have to let the Bible define its terms. In the case of the word "eternal," we must determine whether biblical writers and speakers mean eternal in the sense of a *continuous action or state*, or eternal in the sense of a *consequence or result*. In addition, there are a number of scriptures where words such as "forever," "eternal," and "everlasting" do not necessarily entail a sense of *infinite* duration. For example, the following list is based (only) on the Greek root *aion**, which appears in the LXX and the NT numerous times, with the general sense of (*world*) *age, forever, always, eternity*, etc. In none of the following cases does the word *aion** bear the sense of infinite eternity.
- Genesis 6:4—"Men of old" (giants/ungodly persons/fallen ones/sons of Cain) did not live infinitely
- Jeremiah 25:12—Destruction of Babylon (though not literally destroyed)
- Genesis 9:12—Perpetual generations

- Exodus 21:6—The man or woman would become one's servant "forever" (!)
- Leviticus 25:34—Perpetual possession of fields
- Deuteronomy 23:3—"Forever" || the 10th generation
- 1 Samuel 2:22—Young Samuel was to serve at the house of the Lord "forever"
- 1 Chronicles 16:5—"Forever" ~ 1000 generations—also Psalm 105:8
- Ezra 4:15, 19—Israelites had been "eternally" resisting political domination
- Psalm 24:7—"Ancient" doors
- Proverbs 22:28—"Ancient" boundary stone
- Jonah 2:6—Prophet confined in (the fish) "forever"

C. Revelation 14 and 20

Before I tackle a few objections from Revelation, let me encourage us to exercise caution when interpreting this highly figurative "book of prophecy" (Revelation 22.19). Many false doctrines have been fabricated from its verses, and we need to tread carefully. In my view it's impossible to take this book literally. By "literally" I don't mean "seriously" or "at face value"! The book must be taken seriously, as both warnings and blessings are attached to reading it in chapters 1 and 22. But actually much of the Bible is impossible to take "literally": apocalyptic, a good deal of prophecy, many figures of speech, accommodative language, many Psalms and other poetry... The rule of thumb when reading Revelation is: **Take the passage figuratively unless forced to do otherwise.** Because literal interpretation almost always does violence to the text. (For example, the 144,000 in heaven of Revelation 7 and 14, who strictly speaking are celibate Jewish males only.)

Revelation has immediate application to the Roman Empire, which was just commencing its severe persecution of the Christians in the reign of Domitian, the Caesar from 81-96 AD. In Revelation 22.14 we read of people both inside and outside the city, but from 22.11 and 22.2 it's quite clear there were still many non-Christians (those "outside") carrying on life as normal. This is *after* the New Jerusalem has come down! (In contrast to the common view that takes the book, especially its final chapters, to describe some future state.) There's a lot we can glean from Revelation, yet we must glean ever so carefully.

There are two passages problematic for the terminal view. If they're taken at face value there are certainly some questions to answer.

Revelation 14.9-11

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

While a cursory reading might lead you to think that this ongoing torment is "for all eternity," there are several reasons to discount that interpretation. The passage is specific to the time of the Roman Empire, and the language highly figurative. The smoke is eternal, but not explicitly the torment. That may be our conclusion, but the passage doesn't state it. "No rest day or night" may just as well imply a limited period of time as an eternal one.

Revelation 18.18 and 19.3 are especially helpful:

When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, "Was there ever a city like this great city?" And again they shouted: "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever!"

These passages describe the destruction of Rome, imperial headquarters of the persecuting power and enemy of the faithful. Notice the words "*forever and ever*," which emphasize not the duration of the smoke or burning but the permanence of the destruction. The careful reader will note that the "smoke of her burning" (18.9) is the result of her being "consumed by fire" (18.8), the just punishment for her sin (18.6-7). In this case punishment was proportional and finite, not infinite in duration.

This has O.T. parallels. **Isaiah 34.10** speaks of the destruction of Edom: "*It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever.*" Edom was laid waste centuries before Christ, and the smoke can *only* be taken in a figurative way. Since this can't be taken literally, and neither can Revelation 19.3, there seems little reason to take Revelation 14.11 literally either. As for the drinking of the wine of God's fury, an O.T. prophetic verse, from an oracle against Edom, sheds further light on the interpretation of Revelation 14:

Obadiah 16

Just as you drank on my holy hill, so all the nations will drink continually; they will drink and drink and be as if they had never been.

The implication is that they drink themselves into oblivion, into nothingness. Then there's the second problematic verse, this time from chapter 20.

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.

Since **20.15** says the *lost* will be thrown into the lake of fire, it is argued, their torment must also last for ever and ever. But can we safely move from the destruction of a Beast and a False Prophet and the Devil to the destruction of sinners in hell, and take for granted they are analogous? The Beast and the False Prophet are *corporate entities*, representing Rome the civil power and Rome the religious power. Can a government or a religion be tortured in fire? Not literally. Again, 20.15 doesn't explicitly say that sinners' torment is for ever and ever. Yet even if it did, such a figurative book as Revelation I doubt would be able to settle the fundamental question conclusively. Death and Hades will also be destroyed in the fire, according to Revelation 20.14, but what does that mean except that they will come to an end? As in the case of the Beast and the False Prophet, it's difficult to conclude anything definite about the fate of sinners from this. The one very definite piece of information we do have is the following:

Revelation 20.13, 15

...and each person was judged according to what he had done... The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Could "the second death" be the final extinction of the individual, body and soul? The first death is simply the death we'll all experience, unless Jesus returns while we're still alive. It's normal physical death. The second death, on the other hand, is the destruction mentioned in Matthew 10.28. There's no life, no consciousness, nothing at all after the second death. Isn't this the natural reading of the passage?

The O.T. allusion in Revelation 20 is to **Psalms 140.9-10**. Let's take a look at Psalm 140 so we can be sure we are understanding Revelation correctly:

Let the heads of those who surround me be covered with the trouble their lips have caused. Let burning coals fall upon them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise.

"The trouble their lips have caused" implies that the punishment will fit, or be in proportion to, the crime. The limit is determined by the amount or nature of the "trouble" caused. Obviously the "trouble" isn't infinite, so it is unwarranted to assume the pain of the fire is infinite. This appears to be the O.T. background of Revelation 20. Remember, the O.T. is the key for understanding Revelation. In 404 verses, there are over 500 O.T. references and allusions. That's why I always recommend people read the whole O.T. before coming to any hard and fast conclusions about the last book of the Bible. Revelation 20.10, which deals with the devil, cannot be used to prove the duration in hell of the punishment of unforgiven sinners. Let's close the discussion of Revelation by returning to one of the final verses:

Revelation 22.19

And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

The "tree of life" gave immortality according to the Genesis account. Even true Christians can *lose* their immortality, which is a God-given blessing, if they tamper with the Word of God. But if the traditional view is right, it's impossible for anyone to lose his immortality, which is considered innate and automatic.

Summing up on Revelation, neither of the problematic verses conclusively teaches that people will be tortured forever in hell. It simply isn't there.

Summary: Initial objections

I've taken all this time to answer the most common objections in order to show that the terminal view *is* a viable interpretation. Though the bulk of the positive evidence for this view is forthcoming, it will be nowhere near as persuasive to someone who has already made up his mind on the interpretational possibilities. We saw that Jesus' words in Mark 9, often presumed to back the traditional view, actually strongly support the *terminal view*. Matt 25, on the other hand, though seeming at first to support the *traditional view* (and without other passages to clarify it appear to do so decisively), is inconclusive because of the ambiguity of "eternal." There are good reasons to understand "eternal" in the second, also biblically common, sense. This fits in excellently with Jesus' words in Matthew 10.28: "Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

As for Revelation, interpreted by many to support the traditional view incontrovertibly, it does nothing of the kind. Revelation 14 draws on O.T. imagery where the image of eternal burning cannot possibly be construed to be "eternal" in the literal, traditional sense. The same can be said of Revelation 20.

The traditional view, if it is true, must base itself on clear, non-ambiguous passages of scripture. However, the most compelling passages marshaled to support it are all somewhere between ambiguous and detrimental to the view!

II. THE TERMINAL POSITION ON HEAVEN & HELL

The terminal view finds support in both Old and New Testaments, which teach the same on the judgment day, the mortality of the soul, heaven as the reward for the righteous and hell culminating in annihilation as the punishment for the wicked.

A. SUPPORT FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. There will be a Judgment Day.

This may not come as a shock to most readers, but just to set the record straight let's review the biblical teaching in the O.T.

Ecclesiastes 3.15-17

...God will call the past to account... I thought in my heart, "God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed."

Since not all right is rewarded nor all wrongs righted here in the earthly life, God will take care of things afterwards. Judgment

Day involves a review of all actions, to be carried out when the time is right. See also Ecclesiastes 11.9.

Ecclesiastes 12.13-14

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Proverbs 24.12

...Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?

This last verse is the one Paul uses in his discussion of judgment in Romans 2.6. He appeals to the authority of the O.T., as N.T. writers constantly did. It would be hard to appeal to the O.T. if it taught inaccurately on these matters.

Psalms 62.11-12

One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.

Psalms 50.21

These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face.

Exactly when will this rebuke occur? The storms of life (Matthew 7.25) don't always do the trick, and it seems God is keeping silent for the time being. But he *will* speak, and there will be many surprised people at the judgment (Psalm 73.17). Their face-to-face rebuke is pending. (Further evidence comes from Proverbs 11.19, 21, 23.) Thus we see that the O.T. teaches a time of judgment, with subsequent reward or punishment, in accordance with one's deeds. Moreover, this teaching isn't limited to the wisdom literature or the prayers of the psalmists. Just like the New Testament, the Old Testament teaches a comprehensive judgment (Genesis 18.25, Deuteronomy 32.35-36, Hebrews 10.30, Romans 12.19).

2. Man is mortal.

The doctrine of man's mortality is well established in the Old Testament, but the traditional or orthodox view is that the human soul is eternal. The scriptures, however, do not contain the doctrine of the immortal soul. (Where's the verse?) Often it's said that O.T. writers taught man's mortality (i.e., no "eternal life") because of their limited knowledge about the afterlife. There's another possibility, however: that the immortality of the soul is a false assumption, unsupported by the Bible. The lack of support in the O.T. in this case doesn't need to be explained away; it's to be expected. The surprising thing is that the O.T. isn't simply silent on the subject. There's a definite "Old Testament" teaching. I put that in quotation marks because it's not really *only* an O.T. teaching; it's a *Bible* teaching. (In the same way, it would be misleading to say that God's goodness is an O.T. teaching, since the N.T. teaches exactly the same.) The real question is, "What does the *Bible* teach?" In the O.T. we read of *Sheol* as the abode of the dead, rendered "hell" in older translations, yet in modern English translations we do not find the word "hell" anywhere in the O.T. Yet this shouldn't be taken to mean hell is only a N.T. concept. Quite the contrary. Let us return to Psalm 140:

Psalm 140.9-10

Let the heads of those who surround me be covered with the trouble their lips have caused. Let burning coals fall on them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise...

The wicked will be thrown into the fire. They will be swallowed up. They will be "consumed". The lake of fire is foreshadowed in the O.T. (Revelation 20 appropriately borrows and adapts this feature in its description of the punishment of the wicked, particularly the opponents of the Christians in the Roman Empire. These enemies of the faith were also slanderous persecutors, just like David's enemies in Psalm 140.11.)

Just as the doctrine of the mortality of the soul has not found wide acceptance within Christendom, so it is within Islam. Interestingly, the Qur'an too seems to allow for an end to the torment of the wicked in hell. "As to the duration of heaven and hell, all Muslims agree that the state of bliss in heaven is eternal. The Qur'an itself assures believers of the eternality of heaven (3.198, 4.57, 50.34, 25.15). But there is no unanimous agreement as to the duration of the lost in hell. The Qur'an speaks of the punishment and torment of eternity, and describes the fire and hell itself as eternal (10.52, 32.14, 41.28, 43.74). The majority of orthodox Muslims accept the eternality of hell based on this testimony. On the other hand, based on such passages as 78.23, 11.107, and 6.128, which indicate the damned will remain in fire for a long time or will be there as long as God wills, many contemporary Muslims believe that the Qur'an leaves open the possibility that the punishment of hell will not last forever" (Normal L. Geisler and Abdul Sareeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 57.

3. The saved will be with God in heaven eternally.

According to the Old Testament, we'll be with God "forever and ever," enjoying "eternal pleasures at [his] right hand" (Psalms 21.4, 16.11). Nor is there any hint that the reward is restricted to a limited period of time.

Psalm 16.9-11

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Psalm 17.15

And I – in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.

While it is true that the notion of heaven was not developed in the O.T. period, it would be false to claim heaven is exclusively a N.T. concept.

4. The wicked will be punished with fire.

As with the previous doctrine, the punishment of the wicked by fire is not as elaborately or explicitly taught in the O.T. as in the N.T., but, once again, it is intimated. Psalm 21:9, which appears in the next sub-section, is one example of a "fire" passage, as is the following:

Psalm 97:3

Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.

Or take this passage from the prophets:

Isaiah 30:27-33

See, the Name of the Lord comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire... The Lord will cause men to hear his majestic voice

and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail. The voice of the Lord will shatter Assyria; with his scepter he will strike them down. Every stroke the Lord lays on them with his punishing rod will be to the music of tambourines and harps, as he fights them in battle with the blows of his arm. Topheth has long been prepared; it has been made ready for the king. Its fire pit has been made deep and wide, with an abundance of fire and wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of burning sulfur, sets it ablaze.

Fire is the most common metaphor for judgment and punishment in the Bible, and the Old Testament is no exception.

5. The wicked will be destroyed, not just tormented forever.

If this proposition is true, then either we must rely upon the N.T. alone for the concept of unending conscious torment or admit that the traditional view is the product of human theology. That in itself wouldn't be surprising, considering the many doctrines that began to be spawned at the very time the N.T. was being written. The issue, however, must be settled from the Bible itself.

Psalm 21.8-9

Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies; your right hand will seize your foes. At the time of your appearing you will make them like a fiery furnace. In his wrath the LORD will swallow them up, and his fire will consume them.

This portion of scripture says that the wicked will be *consumed*. When you consume your dinner, what's left? Nothing. See also Psalm 59.13. How long does the consumption last? Until they are no more. The effect, however, is eternal; there isn't the slightest chance of it ever being reversed. They will cease to *exist*.

Psalm 73.27

Those who are far from you will perish; you will destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

Psalm 92.6-7

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

Psalm 112.10

The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away; the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.

Notice the progression in this last Psalm. The wicked man proceeds along this path:

Vexed → gnashing teeth → wasting away

In the Bible gnashing of teeth is a sign of *anger*, not *agony*. The wicked man doesn't gnash his teeth forever; he ultimately wastes away. We've been conditioned to think of gnashing of teeth as the involuntary response of souls in torment, whereas actually it is the proud and angry response of those who refuse to humble themselves before God. In Psalm 37 it isn't possible to take "gnashing" as a pitiful act of agonized torture. Here it's the proud and willful expression of scorn by a wicked person towards the good:

Psalm 37.12-13

The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming.

Taking the verse in context, the gnashing is going on *before* judgment day. The common understanding of gnashing as a response to torment is incorrect. In the Bible it's a sign of *anger*, not *agony*. Recall how the Jews gnashed their teeth at Stephen before stoning him (Acts 7:54).

God's wrath runs its course (Isaiah 57.16 and Psalm 103.9). Although it could last infinitely long, if that were God's will, the scriptures show that his punitive action in hell is *limited* in duration. There's *logically* a limit to God's anger. Logically because the punishment for sin is always in proportion to the sin itself. A finite quantity of sin doesn't require an infinite amount of punishment.

One final comment on the destruction of the wicked: *Spiritual* death isn't the same as *physical* death. Let's not be confused. The wages of sin is physical death, according to Romans 5. Through Adam sin and death entered the world. But there's a further kind of death: spiritual death. (In one sense, of course, as non-Christians we were dead spiritually [Ephesians 2], but this is a figurative sense.) The spirit of man dies when God destroys both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10.28). Sooner or later all men die physically. But to perish spiritually (Luke 13.5) – that is a much more frightful thing. The point is that, just as physical death means the end of life in the physical body, so spiritual death means the end of life as spiritual beings. We are all created as spiritual beings, so when our spiritual life ends we cease to exist.

You may also want to consult these verses on the ultimate destruction of the wicked: Psalm 9.5, 37.20, 37.37-38, 68.2, 104.35, Proverbs 12.7, 21.28, 24.19-20.

Conclusions: The Old Testament

Before you study *closely* the O.T. teaching about the afterlife, it may seem the O.T. is silent about heaven, hell, and the traditionally accepted Christian picture. In fact, it is *not* silent. It only *seems* silent because it gives no support to the accepted view. The O.T., once again, isn't silent about the end of the wicked. It's only silent as to the view we'd expected to find. Before moving on to the N.T. teachings, let me state one of the most surprising conclusions I've come to in my study: **The O.T. and the N.T. are not at odds with each other over the final punishment of the unrighteous.**

The O.T. and N.T. are in harmony. This shows the organic unity and harmony of the scriptures. The O.T. was the Bible for the early Christians, and the teachings of the N.T. are a continuation of and complement to the teachings of the O.T.

B. SUPPORT FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT

Summarizing the O.T. teaching on the subject,

1. Judgment Day with two alternatives
2. Man is mortal. Immortality isn't innate, it's a reward.
3. The saved will be with God in heaven eternally.
4. The wicked will be punished with fire.
5. This punishment ends in *destruction*, not eternal torment.

Most of us are so much more familiar with the N.T. teaching on these matters that fewer verses are needed to substantiate the basic points than for the discussion of the O.T. and afterlife. This is especially the case for sections 1, 3 and 4. The new view is brought out most clearly in sections 2 and 5.

1. Judgment Day

Jesus reaffirmed the O.T. doctrine of the day of judgment.

John 5.28-29

"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

See also Matthew 25. Purgatory is ruled out of court, as it lacks any supporting scripture. The N.T. teaches but two alternatives.

2. Man is mortal, immortality is a gift.

The N.T. teaching of the mortality of the soul is identical to the O.T. teaching, a consistent thread of doctrine from Genesis onward.

John 5.21

"For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it..."

Acts 13.46, 48

"...you [the Jews] reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life..." When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the Word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Romans 2.7

To those who by perseverance in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

Now we must admit that these are difficult verses to understand if we were born immortal. **Eternal life is conditional** (not for everybody) **and positive**. If we were *innately* immortal, then immortality wouldn't be conditional. And if one can be immortal in hell then, for most of humanity, immortality is the greatest imaginable *curse*. In the Bible immortality is presented as *a blessing*:

Romans 6.23

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1 Corinthians 15.50, 53

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable... For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality...

Mortality *can* yield to immortality. This is awesome! But is it an automatic change happening to every human soul at judgment, regardless of his or her spiritual standing before God? Not at all. This inheriting of immortality is a positive thing, sung to the tune of victory:

1 Corinthians 15.54

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

Titus 1.2

...the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time.

Now if this is our *hope* (eternal life), do we possess it *innately*, whether or not we follow Christ? Romans 8 and some clear thinking elucidate the matter:

Romans 8.24

...But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?

If we already had eternal life, we wouldn't need to hope for it. Yet not until the last trumpet will eternal life unconditionally be ours. Eternal life is a reward for the saved – and for the saved only. This is also the teaching of Jude and Revelation:

Jude 21

Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

Yes, we begin to receive eternal life in baptism, but in another sense the victory isn't clenched till we've died faithful. By that time it's impossible to fall away and forfeit the enormous gift we've received. Eternal life will be our reward.

Revelation 22.19

And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life...

It is indeed possible to lose our share in the tree of life. If that happened, we would certainly *not* live forever. Once again, check it out in Genesis:

Genesis 3.22

"...[The man] must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever."

Just as in the O.T., the N.T. teaches immortality is a reward from God, a reward only for the faithful. The traditional idea of *unending conscious torment and innate immortality* is severely at odds with the Bible. Incidentally, several early writers affirmed the eternal torment view: Justin, Jerome, and Augustine, to mention a few of the big names. Yet several of the early "church fathers" also advocated infant baptism, apocryphal writings, even the priesthood. The point is that regardless of what leading intellectuals taught, the Bible and the Bible only is authoritative in settling biblical questions.

3. The saved will be with God in heaven.

You all knew that already, but just to be encouraging:

1 Thessalonians 4.17

...And so we will be with the Lord forever.

No one contests this, the supporting scriptures are ample, and this paper is really a new view of hell, not heaven, so let's move on.

4. The wicked will be punished with fire.

The O.T. teaching is repeated in the N.T.:

Romans 2.8

But for those who are self-seeking and reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

What kind of wrath and anger? In Mark 9 Jesus, much to the chagrin of modern "churchianity" and its professional clergy, speaks at length about hell.

Mark 9.43-49

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' Everyone will be salted with fire."

Like the O.T., the N.T. says the wicked are thrown into the fire. Whether the fire is literal or not is another matter. "Blackest darkness" (2 Peter 2.17, Jude 13) cannot *literally* describe a (presumably bright) lake of fire. In my opinion both are metaphors, images. Not to say that hell will be *less* terrible than a lake of fire. Rather, the appropriate image of fire, fraught with overtones of destruction, judgment, holiness, and cleansing, gets us thinking the right way about hell. The reality to which a symbol points is never less real than the symbol itself; if a fiery lake is a symbol, we can be assured that hell is in reality far worse.

Interestingly, only Jesus and his brother James *explicitly* mention the burning fire of "Gehenna" (hell). Paul *never* explicitly mentions it, yet he gave the leaders of the church at Ephesus the "full counsel" (Acts 20.27). Draw your own conclusion. Before we discuss the fire's *duration*, let's move on to the final element in New Testament teaching on the afterlife.

5. The punishment ends in destruction.

In Luke 13.5 we read that unless we repent we will all "*perish*." But what does it mean to "perish"? In its basic sense the word carries no sense at all of continued existence or consciousness. The Latin word *perire*, which gives us our English word *perish*, means "to pass away, come to nothing, lose one's life." The Oxford English Dictionary gives this definition:

To come to an untimely end; to suffer destruction; to lose its life.

An end implies nothing further, destruction means annihilation, loss of life precludes eternal life. We know what the word *perish* means, but our understanding of Luke 13 has been determined by the Catholic Church, not by standard English usage. In fact the definition of *perish* changed in *late Middle English* (around 1300). The later, modified meaning, according to the Oxford entry, was: "To incur spiritual death; to suffer moral ruin." But this isn't the original meaning of the word, which was redefined by the medieval church. We are all too familiar with the confusion caused by the *later* definition of the word *baptisma* (baptism). Try to set aside the traditional view, at least for the time being. Ask Dante to wait outside the door till we've finished scouring the scriptures.

Matthew 7.13

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it."

Where does the broad road lead? To eternal torment? No, to *destruction*. This is more like the unthinking buffalo herd stampeding over the edge of the cliff than the masses falling into the hands of Lucifer's torturers.

Hebrews 10.26-27

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. The fire of God's wrath ("raging") will totally *consume* God's enemies. That requires some time. Consumption may be slow or it may be fast, but it isn't instantaneous. As Jesus described opposite destinies in Luke 16, the Rich Man wasn't finished yet.

To illustrate, if acid *consumes* an object, how much is left? None of it, if it's really consumed, and not just corroded. Consumption is total by definition. It's the same with eating. Once you consume your food, it's gone. Chew, swallow, digest, but once you've done that it's gone.

Hebrews 10.39

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

If we shrink back we'll be punished. But the truth is that we'll also be *destroyed*. The passage says nothing of a sort of "figurative" destruction. Destruction is destruction.

Revelation 20.14-15

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.

To understand the "second" death, begin by asking what the first one is. Of course it's physical death. The second one is the spiritual capital punishment administered by God:

Matthew 10.28

"...Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

God can *destroy* our souls. This passage isn't talking about Satan. He is one of those who will be cast into hell (Revelation 20.10). When God destroys a soul, there will be nothing left. After that point the soul will no more survive than our physical body will survive. The soul of man is most emphatically *not* eternal. Not according to Jesus.

2 Peter 2.6

[I]f he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly?"

What *is* going to happen to the ungodly? They are going to go to hell. The punishment of hell is not under dispute. Hell is biblical, real, and horrible. The issue is: What is the nature of the punishment? And this passage says that Sodom and Gomorrah, which were burnt to ashes, are an example of what will happen to the ungodly. So if the traditional view is correct, why aren't these cities *still* burning?

2 Peter 2.12

...They are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish.

2 Peter 3.7

By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

Destruction is the order of the day, not eternal conscious torment. Yet some will experience a longer punishment than others, as Luke 12 makes clear:

Luke 12.47-48

"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

Responsibility is proportional, and judgment is based on ability and knowledge. This isn't just logical, it's biblical. Jesus' analogy makes an assumption about time. If it should be taken literally, some were going to receive more blows than others. Which takes longer, few blows or many? Many, of course. In other words, some punishments will last longer than others. That's the implication of the text. So the length of the punishment is proportional to the amount of guilt, or the level of responsibility the individual has failed to live up to.

Another implication is that the punishment will eventually end. This means that whether it is a million years or forever – however hard psychologically for us to grasp – does actually make a difference. We are not splitting hairs here. In mathematics class, students are not allowed to “round up” really large numbers to infinity. The difference, in fact, between any number, however large, and infinity is *infinity*. One is *limited*, the other is *infinite*. That is precisely the point of this article: that the punishment of hell runs its course.

Summary so far

Both Old Testament and New Testament teach the same: a punishment for the wicked that begins in torment and ends in destruction. Once again, consider the paradigm laid out at the beginning of the article:

Traditional view:	(Infinite) corporal punishment
Annihilationist view:	Capital punishment
Terminal view:	Corporal + capital punishment

III. RELATED QUESTIONS

Many protests have been leveled against this view, and they're not to be taken lightly. As Proverbs 18.17 says, "The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him." A good theory must be able to stand the test of criticism. Yet are the objections really weighty enough to support the traditional view and overthrow this one? Not at all as we shall see.

A. If the new view is right, why didn't Jesus ever correct the traditional view?

Quite simply because the "traditional" view may not have ever really caught on till well after Jesus' time. We've assumed Jesus supported the traditional view through default. (He never tried to correct the common misunderstanding.) But what makes us so sure first century Jews held to eternal punishment in the traditional sense?

They hadn't got the idea from the O.T. Neither the O.T. nor the N.T. teaches eternal torment. Like me, you probably thought it was somewhere in there, right? (Which verse? I haven't been able to find it.) Plato, 4 centuries earlier, had taught the immortality of the soul, but his influence was little felt in N.T. times. And the first time the Apocrypha, written shortly before and after the first century, speaks of eternal torment is Judith 16.17. So where did Jesus' contemporaries supposedly get the view of infinite hell?

Moreover, are we sure there was a consensus in Jesus' day? Why would Jesus have attempted to correct the prevailing view if there *was* no unified view in his day? (It would certainly be misleading to claim there's only one view on the afterlife in today's religious world.)

Yet even if the majority of Jews in Jesus' day *did* believe in the later Catholic view, and even if for his own reasons Jesus made no attempt to enlighten them, that's irrelevant, ultimately, as far as we're concerned. The question about hell is a biblical question, and its answer needs to be derived, ultimately, from the Bible.

Speculation about Jesus' reasons for addressing or not addressing various conceptions floating around in his day are bound to be highly speculative.

B. Luke 16 (The Rich Man)

This turns out not to be much of an objection, since the passage never says the Rich Man would be in Hades forever, only that "those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us" (Luke 16:26). We may *assume* he would be there forever, and certainly many have shuddered to think of their loved ones in hell "for eternity." But the traditional torment interpretation has been read into the text, which, honestly, allows either view.

A couple of notes are in order about this passage. First, the NIV has mistranslated Hades, the waiting place in the underworld, as "hell." Yet this is not the Greek word for hell (*gehenna*). Second, you may wonder why is someone in the fire if this isn't hell? Jesus has adapted a common story—about a rich man and a poor man, whose roles are reversed in the next world—to make his point. We are not obligated to take the passage literally. Yet even if we do, the dread of the judgment day—still future—was a sort of punishment itself. Even the demons dreaded torment in advance of the judgment (Matthew 8:29). And in the early church arose the belief that the damned could feel the heat of the lake of fire even before their irrevocable sentence.

C. Galatians 1.9 (Eternally condemned)

The Greek words *anathema esto* strictly speaking do not read "let him be eternally condemned," but rather "let him be 'anathema.'" Anathema is the strongest possible curse, but no hint of eternal torment is inherent in the Greek. The NIV translators have opted for a more traditional translation of the Greek expression, which is fine, provided we haven't determined in advance what "eternally condemned" means. Remember, eternal condemnation doesn't necessarily mean eternal torment, as we have seen, rather an eternal sentence from which there will never be escape or appeal. So this isn't a case of mistranslation.

As in the instance of Luke 16, we see how easy it is to read our position into the text. We read "eternally condemned" and think, "See – it says *eternally* condemned. Hell is eternal." Well, hell *is* eternal, but that's not the question. The question is what "eternal" means in this context, and what "eternal condemnation" means in the Bible. If the verse had said "Let him be eternally *tormented*," we would have a case for the traditional view. But it doesn't, and so we don't. Moreover, Galatians 6 teaches the opposite of the traditional view anyway:

Galatians 6.8

The man who sows to please his sinful nature [*sarx*, flesh, Greek], from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

Destruction is the end of the wicked, not eternal torment.

D. Matthew 5 & 18 (Never getting out of prison)

Matthew 5.26

"I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny."

Matthew 18.34-35

"In his anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Let's begin by honestly admitting that these passages are difficult to understand. Jesus could certainly mean that we *never* "pay" our way out, and thus remain in hell forever. On the other hand, he could also

mean that we sooner or later *do* pay our way out. The passages allow either interpretation. But they absolutely do not *prove* the traditional view because they do not *prove* either view.

E. Luke 12.47 ("That" servant)

This passage says some will receive few, some many blows. Its application to hell seems clear and direct. Yet it has been objected that the proper context of Luke 12.47-48 rules out applying the principle to non-Christians. Take a look at the passage again:

Luke 12.47-48

"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

Peter had asked in verse 41, "Lord, are you telling this parable [about his return in judgment] to us, or to everyone?" In fact Jesus gave no direct answer to the question, instead discussing the master-servant relationship. Still, the passage does seem to apply to God's people more than to outsiders. But will God's delinquent people really be "beaten"? What about "no condemnation in Christ?" (Romans 8.1) And even if they were beaten (which in my mind is questionable theologically), then how much more would the principle suit non-Christians.

Moreover, the passage distinguishes between servants who know their master's will and those who don't. But don't all *Christians* essentially "know" their master's will? Those who know less, like non-Christians, are those "who do not know" (see also 2 Thessalonians 1:8).

The principle concerns knowledge and responsibility. Since this pertains to God's way of dealing with men, it seems unlikely that he would suspend the principle in the case of non-Christians. So while we can accept that the passage was originally spoken to the Twelve and applies to the servant people of God, it's untrue that the principle is invalid for the lost in general.

F. Daniel's 3 friends

Daniel 3.27

...the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

This passage too has been taken to illustrate or prove that God can keep sinners in the fire eternally. "See, the fire didn't kill them," it is pointed out. "The fire didn't destroy them – their physical bodies were somehow preserved." Yet by strict logic, this is actually an instance of God's *protection* from burning, hence a poor choice for the traditional view. Once again, it's not disputed that God can do whatever he wants to. "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever pleases him" (Psalm 115:3). The point isn't what God *can* do, but what he *does*. Daniel's friends those give no assistance in supporting the traditional view.

G. What about the burning bush?

Exodus 3.2

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.

Does this passage prove that lost souls burn forever in hell? Naturally God has the ability to cause something to burn without burning up. Conceded. He's God, after all. But in this case the bush's burning was only temporary. Its combustion was assisted and prolonged by God, but not eternally.

IV. FINAL APPEAL

Well, the first has presented his case and the second has as well (Proverbs 18.17). How forceful do the objections seem to you now? I want to leave you with three questions:

(1) Are you dissuaded from the terminal view because it takes more than one Bible scripture to explain the duration of hell? This is the case for many Bible teachings. To convincingly explain baptism or Jesus' divinity it's helpful to use a number of verses. Do you think all this is exegetical gymnastics, or is it sound?

(2) What does *the Bible* – not your minister, small group leader, church, commentary, or even your conscience or feelings – say about the subject? The Bible is our only arbiter and authority in settling the issue.

(3) Is the alternative, the traditional view of hell/the immortality of the soul, really more convincing than the view here presented? Of course you have to do your own homework, as a Berean of noble character. Re-read the paper, check the scriptures in context, think it through. Make your own decision. Finally, what will be different if we embrace this new understanding of judgment and hell? A number of things, but let's start with what will stay the same.

WHAT'S THE SAME

- Hell is still real, horrible, conscious, and irreversible.
- The terminal view is not "annihilationism," nor does it surrender the biblical teaching of the "raging fire which consumes the enemies of God."
- We still "sentence ourselves" by sin, failure to seek God, and rejecting the Savior.
- Evangelism is still imperative; no one goes to heaven apart from Jesus.
- There will still always be many who scoff at the concept of an authoritative and sovereign God who punishes.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT

- No one will "spend eternity" (infinitely) in hell. Punishment eventually *terminates* in destruction.
- Eternal life is a gift from God, not something automatic.
- The O.T. and the N.T. square with each other.
- Many Christians will be relieved and enjoy the Christian life more than ever.

CHECK YOUR HEART

Don't let your feelings stop you from accepting this view, but on the other hand don't let your feelings draw you into this view. Some of the implications are attractive, but we can't go around deciding doctrine based on our feelings. My appeal to you, brothers and sisters, is to study the topic for yourself. (And not to rush to a hasty conclusion, nor to embrace this teaching because it appeals to you personally, but on biblical grounds first and foremost.) Then we will be able to "leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of... the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so" (Hebrews 6.1-3).