

URBAN LEGENDS OF THEOLOGY (Part 4)

Dismantling common misconceptions about God, the Bible and the Christian life

Fall 2025.2

Class Objective: To refine our faith and understanding by dismantling misconceptions regarding God, the Bible and the Christian life.

Class Overview

1. Introduce *Urban Legends of Theology* by Michael Wittmer
2. Clarify the meaning of the term urban legend as used in this class
3. Understand the degree of personal impact connected with various misconceptions
4. Elevate the pursuit of truth as the ultimate goal of analyzing error
5. Emphasize edification as the primary purpose of this study
6. Explore the following misconceptions in light of biblical truth:
 - a. The name of the Son of God is Jesus.
 - ➡ b. Unbelievers are annihilated in hell.
 - c. Justification means “just as if I had never sinned.”
 - d. We should forgive others for our own good.
 - e. Christianity is not a religion—it’s a relationship.
 - f. I don’t need church to have a relationship with God.

Notes

Urban legend: Unbelievers are annihilated in hell.

I. Annihilationism

A. “This is the view that those who die apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ will be ultimately destroyed. Annihilationists reject the historic view of hell as conscious, endless punishment. According to some annihilationists, this destruction occurs at death. According to most of its proponents associated with evangelicalism, however, this destruction will take place after a period of punishment in hell, which will pass away at the new creation.” *C. Morgan*

B. Who believes in annihilationism?

1. Historically, this view has been taught by Seventh Day Adventists (1863), Jehovah Witnesses (1870’s) and more recently by some Evangelicals (John Stott, Clark Pinnock, John Wenham, and Edward Fudge, et al.).

II. Reasons people would believe in annihilationism

A. We all have loved ones and friends, both living and dead, who are unbelievers. (emotional)

B. Belief in a God of love and compassion seems irreconcilable with people suffering eternally. (theological)

1. “There is no doctrine I would more willingly remove from Christianity than [hell], if it lay in my power ... I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully: ‘All will be saved.’” C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

C. One note of caution. Theology is always close to home when we have a vested interest in the subject, and this is even more the case when it comes to the doctrine of hell. It concerns our future destiny, and more pointedly, the future of those whom we love. Discussion of the matter often becomes extremely emotional, and no excuse should have to be made for this. People dissenting from more traditional views are accused of doing so for ‘emotional’ reasons, whatever they may actually be. However, it seems right that we should never be afraid of feeling the force of our emotions, as long as they are never allowed to be the overriding force. Truth remains the same, whatever our reactions to it or feelings about it may be. I may often feel that God is far away, but the experience of my feeling does not alter the truth that God is closer than I can ever imagine. It is when I make my decisions on those feelings alone, and ignore the witness of Scripture, that danger comes. So, be

warned: hell is an emotional subject, but we must let the Scriptures be the final arbiter on the truth of the matter. *Tony Gray*

D. The historic view of the church regarding the Bible's teaching on the punishment of unbelievers is that they will endure never-ending torment in the lake of fire and are shut out of the New Jerusalem, the joyous dwelling place of God and his people forever (Rev. 20:10, 14–15; 21:8; 22:14–15). The majority of Christian scholarship has argued that annihilationism fails to do justice to Scripture and does not fit the biblical story, because at the end the unsaved do not cease to exist but continue to experience the judgment of God.

III. The nature and reality of hell in the New Testament

A. Throughout the New Testament descriptions of hell point to the existence of eternal judgment.

1. Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' Matthew 25:41
2. . . . just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. Jude 7
3. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name. Revelation 14:11
4. Other examples include: Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:41, 46; Mark 9:43–48; 2 Thess. 1:9–10.

B. The New Testament speaks of hell using a threefold picture of punishment, destruction and banishment. (adapted from C. Morgan)

1. The most prominent description of hell is that of **punishment**.
 - a) Every New Testament author communicates this idea. It is presented as something that is deserved, consists of suffering and is eternal.
 - (1) And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. Matthew 25:46
 - (2) ⁷ . . . when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9
 - (3) Other examples include: Mark 9:42–48; Matthew 5:20–30 and chapters 24–25; Luke 16:19–31; Hebrews 10:27–31; James 4:12; 5:1–5; 2 Peter 2:4–17; Jude 13–23; Revelation 20:10–15.
2. Another significant image of hell is **destruction** or death.
 - a) This destruction is likened to death, the second death, loss and ruin.
 - (1) Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. Matthew 7:14
 - (2) There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. James 4:12
 - (3) ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. Revelation 21:8

(4) Other examples include: Matthew 7:24–27; 24:51; Luke 13:3–5; Romans 9:22; Galatians 6:8; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–3; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10; 1 Timothy 6:9; Hebrews 10:27; James 1:11–15; 5:3–5; 5:20; 2 Peter 2:6; John 3:16.

3. A third concept of hell is **banishment**.

a) Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ Matthew 25:41

b) ¹² “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. Revelation 22:12–15

c) Other examples include: Matthew 25:41; Mark 9:42–48; Luke 13:22–30; John 15:1–7; Romans 1:24, 26, 28; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10.

C. “It is also important to understand that the scriptural teaching about hell interrelates to the rest of theology and ultimately fits into a coherent whole. Note how the pictures of hell as eternal punishment, destruction, and banishment correspond to the biblical teachings concerning God, sin, the atonement, salvation, and heaven.” *C. Morgan*

IV. Four common arguments of annihilationists

A. Everlasting does not necessarily mean endlessness.

1. The first argument is of necessity an attempt to explain “eternal punishment” in Matthew 25:46—where it’s parallel to the phrase “eternal life”—as not necessarily carrying the implication of endlessness. Granted that, as is rightly urged, “eternal” (*aionios*) in the New Testament (NT) means “belonging to the age to come” rather than expressing any directly chronological notion, the NT writers are unanimous in expecting the age to come to be unending, so the annihilationist’s problem remains where it was. The assertion that in the age to come life is the sort of thing that goes on while punishment is the sort of thing that ends begs the question. *Packer/Ortlund*

B. Unbelievers are not immortal.

1. Here it is argued that belief in the immortality of the soul is something that has been imported from the philosophy of Plato and is not implicit in the New Testament. Therefore, the argument runs, because people are not immortal apart from salvation in Christ, the biblical imagery of death, destruction, fire and darkness infer that unbelievers will cease to exist after death and judgment.

2. “Texts like Jude 6, Matthew 8:12, Matthew 22:13, and Matthew 25:30 show that darkness signifies a state of deprivation and distress, not of destruction in the sense of ceasing to exist. After all, only those who exist can weep and gnash their teeth, as those banished into the darkness are said to do. . . . Nowhere in Scripture does death signify extinction; physical death is departure into another mode of being, called *sheol* or *hades*, and metaphorical death is existence that is God-less and graceless; nothing in biblical usage warrants the idea that the “second death” of Revelation 2:11; 20:14; and 21:8 means or involves cessation of being.” *Ortlund*

3. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul explains, or extends, the meaning of “punished with everlasting [eternal, *aionios*] destruction” by adding “and shut out from the presence of the Lord”—which, by affirming exclusion, rules out the idea that “destruction” meant extinction. Only those who exist can be

excluded. It's often been pointed out that in Greek the natural meaning of the destruction vocabulary (noun, *olethros*; verb, *apollumi*) is "wrecking," so that what's destroyed is henceforth nonfunctional rather than annihilated altogether. *Packer/Ortlund*

4. It is this aspect of annihilationism that gives rise to the term conditionalism, often called conditional immortality.

C. It would not be just of God to punish unbelievers endlessly.

1. Annihilationists argue that it would be unfair for an infinite God to endlessly punish finite beings for their offenses against him. The punishment, they protest, is disproportionate to the infraction. However, it is entirely conjectural to assert that annihilation is the appropriate penalty for the unrepentant.

2. However, some annihilationists have acknowledged that it may be that the impenitence of the lost continues throughout eternity. Thus, God's continued judgment would be justified. This could be intended in the several verses that speak of hell as a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28)

3. Ultimately it is only God himself who can establish the appropriate (just) punishment for those who rebel against him (Genesis 18:25). While we do know that his judgment will not be equally severe for all who reject him (Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-15), He alone is the assessor of the seriousness of sin.

D. The joy of saints in heaven would be marred by knowing of the unending suffering of loved ones.

1. This point assumes that believers will be consciously aware of the suffering of the lost and that such awareness will have a negative effect on their joy in heaven.

2. While from a human perspective this might seem reasonable, it is important to remember that the believer's transition to heaven brings significant changes in perspective and understanding (Revelation 21:1-4). They will be free of sinful influences internally and externally, as Paul puts it, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12). Believers will be fully conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). What this will mean for our perception of God's retributive justice is not directly stated in Scripture but it seems unlikely that we will view any aspect of God's character or works in a negative light. To the contrary, though it seems difficult to grasp at this point, we should expect that when we are present with the Lord, every manifestation of God's attributes would call forth our wonder and praise. (Psalm 78:4; 136; Revelation 19:1-3)

V. The subject of hell and eternal punishment must be met with sober reflection.

A. "And let it be quite clear that these realities are awful indeed. Jesus and his disciples taught again and again in terrible terms that there is an irreversible judgment and punishment of the unrepentant. Warnings and loving invitations intermingle to encourage us to flee the wrath to come. *John Wenham*