

## Opening Statement Answering the Question:

*Is the orthodox doctrine of endless torment Biblical?*

By: Steven Scianni

Well, hello and good evening everyone – thank you all for coming tonight. On behalf of Patrick Navas and Dan Mages, my name is Steve Scianni and I will be presenting our reasons for why we answer “NO” to the question “is the traditional doctrine of endless, conscious torment Biblical?” But first, we want to thank Gene, Mike and Joel for having this dialogue with us, and we are appreciative of the staff here at Oasis for hosting the event. We are further very grateful to Ed Enochs for inviting us and for the efforts he made in putting this together.

I'd like to start tonight with a principal – one shared by Ed Enochs as shown in a recent e-mail when he said, “*I believe these debates are an expression of free speech...*” We agree. Without this freedom, and without the freedoms of thought and conscience, human beings would have no recourse to expose error. To think critically and freely; to conscientiously object, to criticize established authorities, and to share one's thoughts are essentials of human liberty that define what it means to be a true protestant and a true reformer. Unfortunately, when it comes to matters of faith and religion, these rights have been the most suppressed and neglected. But such oppression was for an age long past, and today every doctrinal proposition deserves to be scrutinized and examined, and no one is under any obligation to accept it is as true *before* it passes the most rigorous of tests.

Tonight we are *subjecting* to such a test the proposition that God will punish unsaved human beings with conscious torment forever and without end. Our inquiry, further, is specifically interested in what the *Bible* teaches about this final punishment. As it is claimed the Bible teaches this, we needed to check and make sure. After checking, it is with the utmost confidence that we state the following: *The traditional understanding of hell as a place of endless, conscious torment is unbiblical and untrue.* It is an error, and it is a misrepresentation of the scriptural data. And so there is no confusion, here is what we affirm the Bible *does* teach about final judgment: everyone will be resurrected, the righteous and the wicked. The righteous will be raised to live forever, glorified, honored and immortal; the wicked will be judged, condemned to death, shamed and destroyed – commonly called “Annihilation,” the unrighteous will cease to exist.

We are certain of these things for many reasons – allow me now to present 4 of them.

(1) First, the Biblical warrant for eternal torment is lacking. Such language is profoundly *missing* from its pages and the deficiency is inexplicable. Certainly if we are going to call a doctrine “biblical” it should at least appear *in* the Bible. And it would seem that a teaching as significant as the one in question ought to be supported explicitly and frequently, and that the majority of scripture would testify to it. However, this is not what is found. The verbiage of infinite torment is entirely absent from the Old Testament and aside from several texts in the New Testament (Matthew 25:46, Mark 9:43-48, Revelation 14:11, and 20:10) there is almost nothing else for the dogma to be founded upon. At first glance these passages appear to provide support to the traditional notion, but upon examination they cannot be made to do the work of sustaining the entire doctrine – alternate interpretations

are not only available, but are shown to be superior, conforming to the rest of the Bible's imagery of death and destruction.

But analyzing these texts right now is not the point of the argument which is to state that the overwhelming *bulk* and *preponderance* of Biblical testimony is silent toward *endless torment*. How is this possible if God really wanted to communicate it to us? The defenders of Hell's eternal torments must address the following questions: Why is the language of endless torment distinctly lacking throughout the Bible? Was there any good reason why every author of the Bible, who supposedly knew about this punishment, chose not to mention it? Is there any reason why the terminology of the Revelator, "tormented day and night into the ages of the ages" does not appear from cover to cover? There can be only one sufficient explanation: they didn't write about it because they did not believe it.

(2) A second argument is the Biblical Doctrine of Immortality. Immortality, defined as the inability to die and thus live eternally is promised *only* to the righteous, and never to the wicked. That is to say, only the redeemed will live forever, while everyone else has a temporary existence that will come to an end.

Every biblical reference to "Immortality" is toward God, Christ or the redeemed, and there are literally no biblical statements to the contrary that sinners are, or will be, immortal. None! As it stands, mankind lost all claims to immortality when Adam sinned in the Garden. God warned of "death," not endless torment, and he went on to define this death penalty in Genesis 3:19, "Till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return." And to ensure this sentence, God banishes them and barricades the Garden so they could never "take from the tree of life, eat, and live forever" (Genesis 3:24). Thus God will not allow people to live forever in a sinful state. Humankind lost immortality and would eventually have to forfeit their lives.

This is why there is not one single passage in the whole canon of scripture that teaches man or any part of man, be it a spirit or soul, is immortal. The doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul is completely foreign to the Bible, and the popular Christian notion that goes with it – that all human beings *are* immortal and must exist somewhere eternally, is plainly untrue.

This view of Immortality for the righteous is constant throughout scripture. I Timothy 6:16 says that God *alone* possesses immortality, 2 Timothy 1:10 says Christ "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" – which means that any hope of immortality is by those means. We find in Romans 2:7 that God will grant "eternal life" to those who persistently seek for immortality – which begs the question why should people seek for something they already have? It also teaches that those who do not seek it are not going to get it. Lastly, I Corinthians 15:50-55 tells us that Immortality is obtained at the resurrection and not before then: "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed...when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality...." At this point, the victory over death will be complete.

Thus human immortality is wholly dependent upon the grace of God in resurrection, and this is of course dependent upon the power of the Son of God who declared in John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the Life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies." Recall, also, Jesus' words to the Sadducees in Luke 20:34-38, "Those who are considered worthy to

attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead...cannot die anymore because they...are sons of God being sons of the resurrection.” Remember also Jesus’ words to the Jews in John chapter 6 verses 48-58: “Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness and they died....I am the living bread...if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever...and I will raise him up on the last day...” The meanings of these phrases are obvious: only those worthy of the next age and the resurrection of life will “live forever” and be unable to die anymore. Everyone else will not attain immortality.

In conjunction with all this, is the phrase “eternal life.” Clearly synonymous with ‘immortality,’ it is a gift *only* for the righteous. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life” (Romans 6:23). This phrase is never used for the unrighteous and it is the supreme hope and goal for the biblical authors. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). These are two of the most famous passages that so naturally teach only the redeemed will “live forever.”

In summary, God offers forfeited immortality back to those forgiven through Christ. Immortality is expressly forbidden to the ungodly, and not a single time are they ever spoken of as being immortal, incorruptible, going to live forever or obtaining eternal life. The implication for our topic tonight is obvious – the unsaved will not exist forever.

(3) A Third argument is the Biblical Vision for Eternity. In Acts 3:21, Peter spoke of the “Restoration of all things.” This is the “new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). It is most famously depicted in Revelation chapter 21 where it reads, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away...God Himself will be among them and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any sorrow, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away...He who sits on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (Revelation 21:1-5). The pinnacle of scripture is that God is thus going to exterminate evil, restore everything, and establish a renewed creation wherein *only* righteousness exists.

The apostle Paul wrote about it with these words: the creation will be ‘that all things in creation will bow to the lordship of Christ (Philippians 2:9-11), that at the appropriate time God will ‘sum up’ all things in the heavens and earth in Christ (Ephesians 1:10), that God will reconcile all things to Himself, whether things in the heavens or on earth (Colossians 1:20), and that Christ will abolish *all* enemies, every rule, every authority and all power, including death; *all* things will be subject to God so that he will be ‘all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

To imagine, after reading about this renovation of all things, that Paul, John or Peter envisioned a place of suffering, rebellious and unrighteous creatures, not only existing in the new creation, but existing for as long as the kingdom of God, is preposterous in the highest degree. Sin and sinners are all to be extinguished with the old creation, and only righteousness would dwell in the new one.

The Bible does not envision endless torment when it says that God reconciles *all* things, restores *all* things and makes *all* things new. If “all things” does not mean “all things,” or if

God being “everything to everything” could somehow imply that suffering, sin and rebellion will remain forever – then language is utterly meaningless.

(4) A fourth reason we are compelled to believe the Bible does not teach endless torment is because it teaches as plainly as words can, that sinners will be *destroyed*. The language and images of death, perish, consume, burn up, devour, slaughter, destroy is the language of final punishment from Genesis to Revelation, and it is unmistakable.

In every conceivable way, on nearly every page, the Bible communicates that *death* is the penalty for sin. From Adam going back to the slaughtering of the sacrificial animals illustrates this clearly – why didn’t God have these animals tortured instead? Leaving this aside for now, other phrases in the Old Testament include: “transgressors will be altogether destroyed” (Psalm 37:38), “drag them off like sheep for the slaughter” (Jeremiah 12:3), “crush them with twofold destruction” (Jeremiah 17:18), “transgressors and sinners will be crushed together, and those who forsake the Lord will come to an end” (Isaiah 1:28), “You have conceived chaff...my breath will consume you like a fire. The people will be...like cut thorns which are burned in the fire” (Isaiah 33:11, 12), “those slain by the Lord will be many... [they] will come to an end altogether...” (Isaiah 66:16-24), “the soul that sins will die” (Ezekiel 18:4), “the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished...they are consumed as stubble completely withered...they will be cut off and pass away” (Nahum 1:2-13), “Near is the great day of the Lord...a day of destruction and desolation...all the earth will be devoured in the fire of his jealousy, for He will make a complete end...of all the inhabitants of the earth” (Zephaniah 1:14-18), “the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze...so that it will leave them neither root nor branch...you will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet” (Malachi 4:1-3).

And where Malachi leaves off, the New Testament picks up without missing a beat. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire...He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:10-12), “the way is broad that leads to destruction” (Matthew 7:13), “So just as the weeds are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age” (Matthew 13:40), “if anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (John 15:6). Now, let’s take a breath and think about these agricultural images for a moment: what becomes of chaff, uprooted trees, thorns, weeds and dry, dead branches when they are thrown into a fire?

How ludicrous to think that Jesus wanted to convey the message of eternal preservation and torment in fire by using chaff, weeds and dry branches as illustrations – these things communicate the exact *opposite* idea of disintegration and consumption. What is worse, why didn’t Jesus just teach eternal torment plainly and explicitly? In Matthew 10:28 he says, “fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” If what he really meant was “fear him who is going to torment both soul and body in Gehenna forever” why didn’t he just *say* that? It is simply unreasonable to imagine that Jesus wanted to tell us about endless, conscious torment but never actually got around to it, and instead gave us pictures of burning up weeds and dry branches to teach it. To be candid, such a conclusion is ridiculous.

But continuing, the language of destruction permeates the whole of the New Testament; here is a sampling: believers in Jesus would not “perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16), “This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die” (John 6:50), “If anyone keeps my word he will never see death” (John 8:51), “I give eternal life to them and they will never perish” (John 10:28), “Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:26), “He who loves his life will lose it” (John 12:25), “whoever wishes to preserve his soul will lose it...what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:24,25), “every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people” (Acts 3:23), “those who practice [unrighteousness] are worthy of death” (Romans 1:32), “those who have sinned without the law will perish without the law” (Romans 2:12), “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (Romans 9:22), “the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (1 Corinthians 1:18), “to those who are perishing an aroma of death” (2 Corinthians 2:15), “the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 4:3), “in no way be alarmed by your opponents--which is a sign of destruction for them” (Philippians 1:28), “enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction” (Philippians 3:19), “while they are saying ‘peace and safety’ then destruction will come upon them” (1 Thessalonians 5:3), in the book of Hebrews, sinners can expect “judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (10:27), “we are not those who shrink back to destruction” (10:39), “our God is a consuming fire” (12:29). The epistle of James: “the rich man like flowering grass will pass away” (1:10), “when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (1:15), “there is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy” (4:12), “you are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away” (4:14), “your gold and silver have rusted and will *consume* your flesh like fire” (5:3), “he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from *death*” (5:20); 2 Peter, “God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to *destruction* by reducing them to *ashes*, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter” (2:6), “corrupt people are like unreasoning animals to be caught and killed and will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed” (2:10-12), “the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men,” (3:7), “God is not willing that any should *perish*...but the day of the Lord will come like a thief in which the elements will be destroyed with intense heat and the earth and its works will be burned up” (3:9,10).

Is there a satisfactory explanation for why the authors of the New Testament when attempting to teach endless torment used words like consume, kill, death, perish, melt, reduce to ashes and destroy? There is *no* question as to what this language intends to teach – *especially* after historical examples are used to demonstrate the meaning. Not one of these verses could ever be distorted to teach that sinners should expect a fire that will NOT consume them. We are left to wonder, then, how the apostle Peter could have more clearly described the fate of the ungodly than to (1) *say* they will be destroyed, (2) compare it to Sodom’s fate, (3) say this is an example of what is going to happen to them and then (4) state that they are being reserved for the same fire that is going to melt the earth?

To conclude, the biblical record is both unanimous and *perfectly* understandable: sinners are *not* immortal and they are *not* eternal; instructive and direct teaching and descriptions of endless, conscious torment are omitted and mysteriously absent from the scriptures – an impossibility if it was to be preached and believed. Moreover, the future, renewed creation is

a “restoration of *all* things” – a *perfect* state where *only* righteousness will exist. And finally, the persistent and unrelenting language of death, perish and destruction – from the explicit statements of body and soul destroyed, to images of chaff and dead branches being burned up by fire – make it so that there can be *no* reasonable doubt what is to become of the unrighteous. Thank you.

### Additional Evidence

- **Luke 13:1-5** retells the episode where some men report to Jesus that Pilate had killed some Galileans like sacrificial animals and Jesus tells of the 18 people who were crushed by a falling tower. Jesus concludes these people were not more sinful than everyone else and that “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Here Jesus tells us what the consequence of unrepentant sin is – to “perish.” He then defines it for us with two historical events. The imagery is entirely sensible – that would definitely appear to be what “perish” naturally means. What is problematic for tradition, is that Jesus says that *in like manner* sinners would perish. *You will all LIKEWISE PERISH.* It would have been perfect nonsense for Jesus to say that one would perish in a similar way to a building crushing you if “perish” really meant everlasting torment. Such a penalty bears no resemblance whatsoever to the event Jesus connected it to.
- **Jesus says in Matthew 24 and Luke 17** that the coming of the Son of Man and the day of the Lord will be just like the judgments in the days of Noah and Lot. Luke 17:29, 30 reads, “On the day Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day the Son of Man is revealed.” What else could this possibly mean? Jesus explicitly says that just as Sodom was reduced to ashes, sinners will suffer the same fate on the Day of Judgment. And as Peter said in the verse already quoted...God made these cities an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly. How absurd to think that Jesus wanted to convey the idea of eternal torment by using Sodom and Gomorrah being reduced to ashes as an illustration.
- **Absurd defense that all of this language refers to only the body and not the soul.** Jesus makes it clear in Matthew 10:28 that whatever happens to the body is going to happen to the soul – they are both going to be destroyed. James reminds us that repentance saves a “soul” from death. But beyond this how foolish to think that the authors of the NT would leave out the *real penalty* for sin. Why would they save their harshest threats and language for the insignificant matter of the body being destroyed and completely neglect warning the sinner of their immortal soul being tortured forever? Nonsense – these phrases refer to the whole person – their complete being.
- **The sacrificial system of the Old Covenant.** Animals, under the Levitical system were killed, not tortured, and their death, the “shedding of blood” brought reparation for sins. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). If God wanted to impress upon human beings that the ultimate penalty for sin was perpetual torment, he would have not required the killing of Jesus or these animals; instead he would

have tortured them indefinitely. The deaths of Jesus and all these animals are thus a multitude of testimonies for what the penalty for sin is.

- **Jesus' sacrifice on the cross** is the ultimate and unmistakable illustration of this. Being the culmination of the Levitical sacrifices, Jesus bore the penalty and the wrath of God for sin, thus we can know exactly what final punishment is going to be like. He died, was executed, was killed; his life was cut short and he ceased to live, literally and entirely. That is the punishment for sin and that is what will become of those who refuse to repent – they will pay for their sin with their own lives. How could we possibly conclude that the final sentence for sin is endless torment if Jesus did not bear this? Jesus is not currently being tormented forever, rather he had to die and expire so that the price could be paid. Jesus' execution is a decisive depiction of what final punishment is, and none of it even remotely hints at there being an endless suffering involved.
- **Misc. Old Testament illustrations that the penalty for sin is not endless torment.** Why would God conceal this fact from his people and the rest of the world if it were true? Endless torment is not a penalty God is going to inflict otherwise it would be all over the pages of the Old Testament. But not only is there not a word of this, everything there, is contrary to such an idea and in harmony with the penalty of *death*. Adam was to die and return to the dust of the ground (Genesis 3:19), the flood exterminated the sinful population of earth (Genesis 6), Sodom and Gomorrah were consumed by fire for their sins – reduced to ashes (Genesis 19)
- **Leviticus** stated that “If a man takes the life of any human being, he shall surely be put to death...if a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, **eye for eye, tooth for tooth**; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him” (Leviticus 24:17-20). This would have been the perfect time for God to share the *real* penalty of endless torment for sin, but he did not. God's standard of justice is simple and straightforward, whatever you inflict on others, you will have done to yourself. “For the day of Lord draws near....As you have done, it will be done to you...All the nations will...become as if they had never existed” (Obadiah 1:15,16)
- **Each argument presented will be Biblical, Independent, and Thematic.** By Biblical I mean that these arguments will make no appeal to emotional or sentimental dislike toward the doctrine of endless torment; further, no reference to extra-biblical literature will be necessary. By Independent, I mean that each of these arguments stands on its own and any one of them, if true, is sufficient to falsify the proposition that sinners will suffer endless agony. Lastly, by Thematic, I mean that these arguments do not rest on one or two or even several proof-texts scattered here and there – instead they are general themes attested to by the consistent, dominant and majority language of scripture.
- **God will be wrathful and angry for all eternity**, but the Bible expressly denies this, “For I will not contend forever, neither will I always be angry” (Isaiah 56:16). “The LORD is compassionate and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in loving-

kindness. He will not always strive with us, nor will he keep his anger forever” (Psalm 103:8,9). “Who is God like you, who pardons iniquity...He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in unchanging love” (Micah7:18).

- **Fundamental rule of interpretation neglected.** Every Bible interpreter should seek to harmonize an ambiguous minority text with the explicit majority ones – the clear should give light to the unclear. So if the Bible in a thousand places says one thing very clearly, it is highly mistaken to reinterpret the majority to conform to the minority. Why do you interpret the predominant and clear language of death and destruction throughout the bible by the light of several proof-texts, which are at best unclear and have multiple interpretations?
- Man is essentially “dust” and they will eventually go back to it – that is the penalty for transgressing the commands of God. What is more, how could God possibly fail to warn Adam of eternal torment if it were true and tell him that he would die and return to dust instead?
- We find in Romans 2:7 that God will grant “eternal life” to those who persistently seek for immortality – which begs the question why should people seek for something they already have? It also teaches that those who do not seek it are not going to get it.
- The Restoration of all things: God’s promise to Abraham that in his “seed all the families of the Earth shall be blessed” comes to pass (Acts 3:25).
- **Unquenchable fire** (Matthew 3:12, *Jeremiah* 7:20, 17:27, *Ezekiel* 20:47, Isaiah 1:31)
- “these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1:9), “the man of lawlessness brings deception for those who perish” (2 Thessalonians 2:10), “false prophets and false teachers are bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2:1), “their destruction is not asleep” (2:3),