

• *Unending torment for those who worship the beast*

• *Evidence of everlasting torment*

**What kind of eternal punishment?**

• *Is God's fire a punishing fire, an eternal fire, or both?*

**Three views of eternal punishment**

(i) *Universalist – remedial and purifying punishment in eternity*

• *Believe in the imperishability of the soul*

'And the smoke of their torment will rise into ages of ages, and day and night those who worship the beast and his image or who receive the mark of his name do not have any rest'<sup>1</sup>. <sup>10</sup> *And the devil, who deceives them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet also were thrown. There they will be punished day and night into ages of ages.*

Revelation 14:11 and 20:10 are two of three verses (the other being Matthew 25:46) which are thought to be evidence for the Augustinian doctrine of everlasting torment. It was a teaching that was formulated with especial clarity and sharpness by Augustine, the bishop of the North African town of Hippo from AD 396 to 430.

Actually fifteen texts are quoted as teaching 'eternal punishment', but the question is: what **kind** of eternal punishment? Three speak of unquenchable fire<sup>1</sup>. Three speak of eternal fire<sup>2</sup>. One speaks of an eternal sin<sup>3</sup>; another of eternal destruction<sup>4</sup> or eternal judgement<sup>5</sup>. Six more speak of something in God's punishment being eternal<sup>6</sup>. But in point of fact few of these Scriptures come anywhere near to Augustine's teaching. No Bible-believing Christian disputes that God's holy fire is eternal. No Bible-believing Christian disputes that it is endless and inextinguishable before its work is done. The question is: is 'eternal punishment' a matter of eternally punishing people who go on eternally sinning and are eternally unrepentant? Or as the people of Sodom were wiped out from the face of the earth with only smoke remaining, does God's beyond-the-grave punishment do the same eternally? Is God's fire a punishing fire? A consuming fire? Or is it both – a punishing-and-consuming fire?

Before Augustine there were three views of 'eternal punishment' in the church. (i) **Some believed the phrase 'eternal punishment' referred to some kind of punishment which took place in 'eternity' but which was remedial and purifying.** Origen (who spoke early Greek as his mother tongue) used the phrase 'eternal punishment' in this way. He thought every rational creature in the universe would eventually be saved, and that 'eternal punishment' would assist in cleansing them from their sins. So Origen was a 'universalist' – a believer in the final salvation of every creature. There were others who had a similar understanding of 'eternal punishment'.

When the topic is death or punishment, 'destruction' and 'perishing' in this context in the Greek of the centuries in and around the New Testament period included the idea of passing out of existence. But Origen was a Platonist and like all Platonists he strongly believed in the indestructibility and imperishability of the soul. Yet he did not believe in eternally existing wickedness. So he came to believe all would be saved. Few modern Bible-believing Christians have ever accepted this view of the matter, but General Gordon of Khartoum held this view, and so did Andrew Jukes, the 'Brethren' writer of the nineteenth century. It has been judged to be heresy – I think rightly.

<sup>1</sup> 14:11

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:12; Mark 9:43; Luke 3:17  
<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:8; 25:41; Jude 7  
<sup>3</sup> Mark 3:29  
<sup>4</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:9  
<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 6:2  
<sup>6</sup> Matthew 25:46; Mark 9:48; Jude 13; Revelation 14:11; 19:3; 20:10

*(ii) Lengthy punishment followed by destruction for evil-doers*

*• Immortality – a reward at the time of resurrection*

*(iii) Conscious, unending torment*

*Augustine doctrine:*

*• Hell involves physical torment*  
*• Sin and Satan are eternal*  
*• Endless suffering is part of final glory*

*• Eternal dualism – two kingdoms forever with two kings*

*• Life and death are not to be viewed as everlastingly parallel*

*• It is only 'he who does the will of God' who 'abides for ever'*

**(ii) There were others who believed that 'eternal punishment' would be 'long protracted' but would eventually involve the 'destruction' – the extermination – of evil and evil-doers altogether.** It was 'eternal punishment' in that it was eternally irreversible. It did not mean 'eternally being punished'; it meant (for them) receiving a punishment which would eventually destroy and which could never be reversed. After death 'consciousness remains for all who have lived'<sup>a</sup> but 'eternal punishment' means 'they undergo punishment as long as it may please God that they may exist'.<sup>b</sup> These men disagreed with the Platonists, mentioning Plato explicitly as one whose ideas were likely to prove deceptive. Immortality is conferred as a reward at the time of resurrection – and it is the immortality of the glorified body. The lost have no part in it but they undergo 'long protracted torment with raging fire'<sup>c</sup> and 'pass away in failure in everlasting destruction'.<sup>d</sup>

**(iii) Then there were Christian teachers who were strong Platonists who believed that the soul could never be destroyed and 'eternal punishment' therefore meant conscious, unending torment.** It was Augustine especially whose teaching led to this approach to the matter being regarded as 'orthodoxy'. He was a Platonist and a philosopher before he was a Christian. His work on 'the immortality of the soul' was written only a short time after his conversion (AD 386–7). It does not quote Scripture at all but establishes its points only by using Platonic-type philosophical arguments. For a thousand years the theology of Augustine was powerfully influential in the churches. Generally speaking, after Augustine, this view of eternal punishment has been regarded as the one and only 'orthodox' viewpoint. The doctrine that has been held since the days of Augustine includes the ideas that (i) hell involves physical torment, (ii) sin and Satan are eternal, (iii) endless suffering is part of final glory. The good go out to see the wicked (as Augustine said). Watching the damned suffer will be one of the joys of heaven (as Jonathan Edwards said).

But this 'Augustinian' view of 'hell' is undoubtedly too extreme. It is not the way the subject is presented in the New Testament. This view also has the difficulty that it leads into an eternal dualism. Augustine taught that there were two kingdoms that went on for ever with two kings, Jesus and Satan! This is not the way Scripture puts the matter. Sinning is eternal (on Augustine's view), for hell never results in repentance. Pain and suffering are eternal (on Augustine's view). Evil and pain are never (in the viewpoint of Augustine and Edwards) to be abolished. Pain and evil and the devil and sinning – all are eternal!

The doctrine badly needs reconsidering and stating in ways that are closer to Scripture. I cannot discuss the matter very fully here. Our question at the moment must be: what is the teaching of the three key verses, two of which are Revelation 14:11 and 20:10? One can add in passing that Matthew 25:46 does not **have** to mean that punishment and blessedness are equal and parallel. Death destroys; life does not. Eternal life surely means a life eternally growing; eternal punishment means a death eternally intensifying. They have a similarity in that eternal life can never be reversed; eternal death can never be reversed. But life and death are **not** to be viewed as everlastingly parallel. Godliness grows; evil shrinks. Godliness reigns; evil is eventually exterminated. This is the teaching all over Scripture and to interpret Matthew 25:46 any differently from the vast bulk of previously written Scripture is a mistake. It is to treat Matthew 25:46 as a proof-text, giving it more weight than it can bear. Passages that treat immortality as a **reward** are much clearer and Matthew 25:46 cannot be used to overthrow them. It is only 'he who does the will of God' who 'abides for ever' – a much more explicit statement!

• *Not strictly everlasting – evil will be exterminated*

• *Day and night – punishment is unbroken while it lasts*

• *Hell lasts as long as it must in order for sin to be thoroughly punished*

**Conclusion – hell is long-protracted torment and afterwards sin and Satan will be abolished**

What then is the meaning of Revelation 14:11 and 20:10? Personally I am not an Augustinian at this point – much though I admire his doctrine of grace! My view is that ‘into the ages of the ages’ does not have to refer to something that is strictly everlasting, and it is not likely that it should be taken in this way since the **extermination** of evil is a major theme of the book of Revelation. We remember the eight times when Babylon is said to be ‘no more’ according to Revelation 18.

‘Day and night’ simply means that the punishment while it lasts is unbroken. One recalls that Augustine said he believed in unending torment but he considered it possible that there would be no torment in hell on Sundays! But Revelation insists hell-torment really will be torment and it will be unending day-and-night while it lasts ‘into the ages of the ages’. We do not have to believe in the eternal existence of pain and suffering and evil and the devil – but one does have to believe that hell lasts as long as it must in order for sin to be thoroughly punished. And we have to believe (if we believe the Bible) that while hell lasts it is unbroken and the wicked sufferers have no rest day or night. Sinners are tormented **in** the presence of the Lamb<sup>1</sup>. Their punishment is long protracted, but then there is ‘eternal destruction **from** the presence of the Lord’<sup>2</sup>. ‘The smoke of their torment’ goes up for ever but it is not the sign of what **is happening**; it is the sign of what **has happened**. We may believe **both** that hell is ‘long-protracted torment with raging fire’, **and** that sin and wickedness and punishment and Satan are all finally abolished. That is good news indeed.

**Notes**

- a. Justin Martyr, *First Apologia*, 17.
- b. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 5.
- c. Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes*, 2:14.
- d. Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes*, 2:14.

1 14:10  
2 2 Thessalonians 1:9



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