

Eternal Loss

Hell — Annihilation, or the Self-Chosen Loss of God?

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I. A Doctrine Worth Getting Right

Few Christian teachings are harder to speak of than hell, and few are easier to caricature. The Watchtower rejects it outright — not merely the lurid medieval imagery, but the very idea of any conscious, lasting loss beyond death. In its place it puts annihilation: the finally wicked are not punished forever but simply destroyed, snuffed out of existence. Many people, recoiling from cruder pictures of hell, find this a relief, and even an act of mercy on God's part.

The question, though, is not which doctrine we would prefer, but which one Jesus taught — for he spoke of hell more than anyone else in Scripture, and a Christian is not free simply to set his words aside. This page assumes the conscious survival of the soul, argued on its own page; the Watchtower's denial of hell follows from its denial of that survival, so the two stand or fall together. Granting that the soul lives on, the question here is precise: when Jesus warns of the destiny of the lost, does he describe annihilation — or a conscious, eternal loss?¹

II. The Watchtower's Hell: The Grave and Annihilation

The Watchtower's teaching has two parts. First, there is no place of conscious torment: the word "hell" in older Bibles translates the Hebrew *Sheol* and Greek *Hades*, which mean only "the common grave of mankind," where the dead lie unconscious. Second, the finally wicked — those not raised to life — are not tormented but *annihilated*: "Gehenna" is taken to symbolize everlasting destruction, that is, permanent nonexistence. Eternal conscious punishment, the Society argues, would be both unscriptural and a slander on a loving God, a pagan import from Plato and the Egyptians.²

III. What Is True in It

A fair reply must begin by granting what is right here, and a surprising amount is. The Watchtower is correct that *Sheol* and *Hades* frequently mean simply the grave or the abode of the dead, *not* the hell of final punishment; older translations that rendered every such word "hell" genuinely did breed confusion, and even good men like Jacob and Job are said to go to *Sheol*. The Catholic agrees, too, that the cartoon hell of gleeful devils and pitchforks is a distortion, and that a God who tortured creatures for the pleasure of it would not be the God of love. These are real points, and honesty concedes them.³

But none of this touches the actual question. That *Sheol* means "grave" tells us nothing about the destiny of the damned, because the word Jesus uses for *that* is a different word — and to that word we must now turn.

Two of the Watchtower's favorite proof texts are answered by the same distinction. Job prayed to be hidden in *Sheol* until God's anger passed (Job 14:13) — but the refuge he asked for was the grave, not the hell of final judgment, and no Catholic doctrine says otherwise. And when Revelation says that “death and Hades gave up the dead in them” (Rev. 20:13), it is the grave that empties, surrendering its dead for judgment; the very next verse has death and Hades themselves thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14), which is the final state the Watchtower's argument never reaches. A verse about *Sheol* cannot disprove anything about *Gehenna*; it is simply about a different place.

IV. Gehenna: The Word Jesus Used

When Jesus warns of final punishment, he does not say *Sheol* or *Hades*. He says *Gehenna* — a word drawn from the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, a place of ancient idolatrous child-sacrifice that had become an image of the place of the damned. It is *Gehenna*, not the grave, that he describes; and he describes it not as a quiet nonexistence but as a state of active and continuing ruin. There, he says, “the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). The image comes from Isaiah 66:24, where worm and fire work on corpses—but Jesus does not quote it as Isaiah wrote it: in his mouth the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched, an unending process, not a fire that finishes its fuel and goes out. Nor does Jeremiah 7:31 reach the doctrine: what God said never came into His mind was Israel sacrificing its children to Molech in that valley—the abomination that made Hinnom accursed—not the existence of divine judgment, which Jeremiah himself proclaims on nearly every page. Jesus chose the valley as His image of final loss precisely because its horror was proverbial. He calls it “the outer darkness,” a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12) — and the dead, on the Watchtower's own view, do not weep. He warns of being “thrown into the eternal fire” (Matt. 18:8). This is not the language of a man describing extinction.⁴

V. “Torment” Is a Word With a Meaning

The case can be settled lexically as well as by inference, and the lexical point is unusually clean. Where Revelation says that the damned “shall be tormented with fire and sulphur” and that “the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night” (Rev. 14:10–11), the Greek verb is *basanizō*. It is a word for torture, torment, or vexation, and the New Testament uses it of a paralyzed servant “in terrible distress,” of a boat battered by waves, and of demons who beg Christ not to torment them (Matt. 8:6, 29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28). It does not mean to destroy, and it never means to annihilate.

Nor could it. “Unconscious torment” is not a difficult idea but an incoherent one: torment is something undergone, and where there is no one left to undergo it there is nothing for the word to describe. A corpse may be burned, but it is not tormented. The Watchtower

is therefore obliged to read a word that means suffering as though it meant the absence of any sufferer.

Two further details tell against the standard reply. The Watchtower argues that living people were never cast into the Valley of Hinnom, so the image cannot be one of conscious suffering. But Revelation describes the beast and the false prophet as “thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur” (Rev. 19:20), which is precisely the thing said not to happen. And in the scenes of final separation, the consciousness of the lost and of the saved is assumed in a single breath: “There you will weep and gnash your teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves thrust out” (Luke 13:28). Nothing in the sentence makes one party awake and the other asleep. The lost are the ones doing the seeing.⁵

The Watchtower answers the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) by calling it a parable, and the reply concedes more than it wins. Suppose it is a parable. Jesus did not build his parables on falsehoods — every one of them runs on the way things really work: seed really grows, debts really come due, sons really squander inheritances. In this story the dead are conscious immediately after death — the rich man sees, thirsts, remembers his five brothers, and is “in anguish in this flame” — and he is conscious in Hades itself, the very place the Watchtower says is dreamless sleep. If those details were false to the afterlife, the parable would have misled everyone who heard it. And it is worth noticing which way the Society’s own rule runs: the 144,000 of Revelation, a number in a book of symbols, is read with strict literalism, while a scene of conscious dead in a teaching of Jesus is set aside as merely a parable. Literal where literalism helps and figurative where it hurts is not a method of reading; it is a verdict looking for support.

VI. The Sentence That Settles It

One sentence of Jesus is, by itself, very difficult for annihilationism to survive. At the close of his account of the Last Judgment, he says of the two destinies: “These will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into *eternal life*” (Matt. 25:46). The two halves are built on a single word — the Greek *aiōnios*, “eternal,” “everlasting” — set in exact and deliberate parallel.⁶

And that parallel is fatal to the annihilationist reading. For the same word cannot mean two different things in the two halves of one sentence: it cannot mean “unending, conscious” when applied to the life of the righteous and “instant and final” when applied to the punishment of the wicked. If the life is everlasting, as no Christian doubts, then the punishment is everlasting in the same sense. The Watchtower, to be fair, does not dispute that: its translation reads “everlasting cutting-off,” a result that lasts forever. The dispute is the noun. *Kolasis* means punishment—no lexicon gives “cutting-off,” which the Society

reaches by defining a related verb and reading it back into the noun. There is a further difficulty: a *punishment* that consists simply in ceasing to exist is no punishment to the one who undergoes it, for there is no longer anyone there to undergo it. The annihilated suffer nothing, lack nothing, regret nothing. Jesus calls it punishment — and punishment is something a person experiences.

VII. “Destruction” Does Not Mean Extinction

The Watchtower’s reply leans on the Bible’s language of “destruction” — the wicked will be “destroyed,” will suffer “eternal destruction” (2 Thess. 1:9), will die “the second death” (Rev. 21:8). Surely, it argues, to be destroyed is to cease to be. But this misreads the words. The Greek terms for “destroy” and “destruction” — *apollumi* and *apoleia* — do not normally mean annihilation. They mean ruin, loss, being lost. It is the same word Jesus uses for the “lost” sheep, the “lost” coin, the “lost” son in Luke 15 — and none of those had ceased to exist; they were ruined, or astray, or away from home, but fully real and able to be found.⁷

To “destroy” a thing, in this biblical sense, is to wreck it as the thing it was meant to be — to ruin its purpose and its flourishing. For a human person, made for God, the ultimate ruin is precisely the *loss of God* — a person still real, still himself, but undone, his whole reason for being forfeited. That is a destruction far more terrible than mere extinction, and it is one the person continues to suffer. “Eternal destruction,” Paul says, is to be “away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:9) — a separation, which presupposes someone who is separated.

The same reading answers the two texts most often pressed for annihilation. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23) settles nothing until we ask what Scripture means by death, and Scripture regularly means separation rather than cessation: God told Adam he would die on the day he ate, and Adam lived on for centuries (Gen. 2:17); Paul tells the Ephesians they *were* dead in trespasses while manifestly alive (Eph. 2:1). And “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19) is said of the body, which the Church has never claimed is exempt from the grave. Neither verse establishes the extinction of the person.

VIII. There Are No Degrees of Nonexistence

Scripture does not treat the lost as an undifferentiated mass; it grades their punishment. Christ tells Chorazin and Bethsaida that it will be “more tolerable” for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for them, and more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for Capernaum (Matt. 11:20–24). The servant who knew his master’s will and did not do it “shall receive a severe beating,” while the servant who did not know “shall receive a light

beating” (Luke 12:47–48). Just as the tradition speaks of degrees of glory among the blessed, it speaks of degrees of loss among the damned.

Annihilation cannot express any of this, and the reason is arithmetical rather than theological. There are no degrees of nonexistence. Extinction is exactly the same for everybody, so that on the annihilationist account the sentence passed on a man who spent his life destroying others and the sentence passed on a petty thief are identical—not merely similar in kind, but the very same condition, admitting of no more and no less.

This is worth pressing because it is often assumed that annihilation is the more merciful doctrine. In one obvious sense it is. But mercy is not the only thing at stake in a judgment, and a final reckoning incapable of distinguishing between the worst of crimes and the least is not a more loving judgment. It is a less just one—and it makes the grave, rather than God, the thing that finally equalizes everyone.⁸

IX. The Objection from Love

Beneath the exegesis lies the Watchtower’s real and deepest objection, and it deserves to be met head-on, for it is felt by many tender consciences: how could a God who *is love* (1 John 4:8) condemn anyone to suffer forever? Is not eternal punishment simply incompatible with infinite love?

The objection has real force — against a *caricature*. If hell were a torture-chamber that a vindictive God built to inflict the maximum of pain on helpless victims, it would indeed be irreconcilable with love, and we should be right to reject it. But that is not the Catholic doctrine, and it is important to say so plainly. God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). He predestines no one to hell. He pursues every soul with his grace to the very end. Hell is not something God *does* to those who longed for him; it is the home of those who, offered the love of God, finally and freely refuse it.⁹

X. The Charge of Pagan Origin, Applied Selectively

The last objection is historical rather than exegetical: that eternal punishment is no part of revelation but an importation from Babylon, Egypt and Plato. Two things are wrong with it.

The first is that the test is not applied evenly. Pagan religions also taught a blessed life beyond death, and the Watchtower does not on that account surrender the hope of resurrection or of a paradise earth. A principle which condemns eternal punishment as pagan while sparing eternal happiness is not functioning as a principle but as a

preference—the same difficulty that attends the pagan-origins argument wherever it is used.

The second is that the alleged parallel is not there. The Babylonians did not teach a fiery eternal punishment for the wicked. The afterlife of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the house of dust, dim and joyless, where the dead sit in darkness and eat clay; and its bleakness falls on everyone alike, drawing no distinction whatever between the righteous and the wicked. That picture is in fact a good deal closer to the Watchtower's hell than to the Christian one.

There is a further point which cuts the other way. Where ancient peoples did expect the wicked to answer for what they had done, this is not evidence of borrowing but of something very widely felt—that it would be intolerable for evil to go permanently unaddressed, and that a universe in which the murderer and his victim come to precisely the same end is not a just one. The near-universality of that intuition is a reason for taking it seriously, not for dismissing it as contamination.¹⁰

XI. What Hell Actually Is

So hell, rightly understood, is not first of all about fire, but about *loss* — the loss of God, freely chosen. We are made for God; he is the one Good in whom the human heart can finally rest. To reject him utterly and to the end is therefore to lose the one thing that could ever have made us happy, and to lose it by our own choice. The traditional “fire” is the image for the anguish of that loss; but the essence of hell, the theologians say, is the *pain of loss itself* — to have refused, forever, the Love for which one was made.¹¹

The tradition has precise words for this. Theologians distinguish the pain of loss (the *poena damni*) from the pain of sense (the *poena sensus*), and they treat the pain of loss as the essence of hell: a soul that has finally rejected God needs no flame in order to be in torment. The Catechism speaks the same way, affirming the “eternal fire” while defining the chief punishment of hell as “eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created” (CCC 1035).

Understood this way, hell is not the denial of human freedom but its most awful affirmation. God will not drag the unwilling into heaven; love cannot be coerced, and a heaven entered by compulsion would not be heaven. If a creature, to the last, says to God “I will not have you,” God in the end honors that “no” — and the honoring of it is hell. As C. S. Lewis put it, in an image that is his rather than the Church's though it catches her meaning exactly, the doors of hell are locked on the inside. That is a far more sobering thing than annihilation, and a far more respectful one: it takes with full seriousness the dreadful dignity of a free “no” to God.

XII. Conclusion: The Door Locked from Within

The Watchtower is right to recoil from the caricature of hell, right that *Sheol* is often just the grave, right that God is love. But it is wrong to conclude that there is no hell — for Jesus, who is also love, spoke of *Gehenna* and its unquenchable fire, set “eternal punishment” in exact parallel with “eternal life,” and described a state of conscious anguish that annihilation cannot account for. The biblical “destruction” of the lost is not their extinction but their ruin: the forfeiting of the God for whom they were made.

Hell is real, then, and eternal, and conscious; but it is not God’s cruelty — it is the terrible fruit of human freedom, the self-chosen loss of God by those who will not have him. And this, rightly seen, is not a doctrine that makes God less loving but one that makes his love more serious: he loves us enough to let our “yes” and our “no” be real. The gospel’s answer to the fear of hell is not to deny that it exists, but to proclaim the One who went to the cross precisely so that we need never choose it: “God so loved the world ... that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The door is locked from within — and Christ has done everything to give us the will to open it.

Endnotes

1. This page assumes the conscious survival of the soul, established on the companion page “When We Die: Does the Soul Survive?” The Watchtower’s denial of any conscious hell follows directly from its doctrine of soul-sleep: if the dead are unconscious, there can be no conscious punishment. So the prior question governs this one. Granting that the soul survives — as the New Testament teaches — the question here is what Scripture says of the destiny of those who finally refuse God: annihilation, or eternal loss?

2. The Watchtower denies any hell of conscious punishment. “Hell” translates the Hebrew *Sheol* and the Greek *Hades*, which it defines as merely “the common grave of mankind,” where the dead lie unconscious. Eternal torment is called “unscriptural,” of pagan (Platonic and Egyptian) origin, and “an insult to” God’s love (1 John 4:8). The finally wicked are not tormented but *annihilated* — “Gehenna” symbolizing everlasting destruction (nonexistence), not torment. See “Is Hell Real? What Does the Bible Say About Hell?” (jw.org).

3. It is true, and the Catholic grants it, that the Hebrew *Sheol* and the Greek *Hades* often mean simply the grave or the realm of the dead, and are not the “hell” of final punishment. The King James Version’s uniform rendering of several distinct words as “hell” did cause confusion, which the Watchtower rightly notes. But the word that denotes the place of final punishment is a different one — *Gehenna* (from the Valley of Hinnom), used by Jesus for the destiny of the damned (Matt. 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 23:33; Mark 9:43–48). The question is not what *Sheol* means but what Jesus means by *Gehenna*, and there he speaks of unquenchable fire and the undying worm.

4. Other texts confirm conscious, continuing loss: “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48, citing Isa. 66:24); “the outer darkness” where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30); the rich man “in anguish in this flame” immediately after death (Luke 16:23–24); and, in Revelation, “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night” (Rev. 14:11), while the devil, the beast, and the false prophet are “tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). Weeping, anguish, and unrest are states of a conscious being, not of nonexistence.

5. On *basanizō* (Rev. 14:10; 20:10) as torment rather than destruction, compare its use at Matthew 8:6, 29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28; Revelation 9:5. On the beast and the false prophet cast in alive, Revelation 19:20; on the mutual consciousness of the saved and the lost, Luke 13:28 and Matthew 8:11–12. See Jason Evert, *Answering Jehovah’s Witnesses*, ch. 13.

6. Matthew 25:46 is the decisive text against annihilationism: “These will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into *eternal life*.” The one Greek word *aiōnios* (“eternal”) governs both destinies in perfect parallel. If the “eternal life” of the righteous is everlasting and conscious, then the “eternal punishment” of the wicked is everlasting and conscious too; one cannot make the same word mean “unending” in one half of the sentence and “snuffed out” in the other. A *punishment* that consists in ceasing to exist is, moreover, not experienced as punishment at all — the annihilated feel nothing.

7. The Watchtower leans on the language of “destruction” (e.g., Matt. 10:28; 2 Thess. 1:9; the “second death,” Rev. 21:8) as proof of annihilation. But Matthew 10:28 cuts the other way before it cuts at all: men can kill the body and cannot kill the soul, so the soul survives bodily death, and “can destroy” names a power, not a program. And the Greek words for “destroy” and “destruction” (*apollumi*, *apoleia*) regularly mean ruin, loss, or being lost — not annihilation into nothing. The “lost” (*apollumi*) sheep, coin, and son of Luke 15 still exist; they are ruined or away, not extinguished. “The destruction” of a thing in Scripture is the wrecking of its purpose and flourishing, which for a person is the loss of the God for whom he was made — a ruin he continues to suffer, not a cancellation of his being.

8. On degrees of punishment, Matthew 11:20–24 and Luke 12:47–48; on degrees of glory, 1 Corinthians 15:41–42. The argument is not that annihilation is unmerciful but that it is indiscriminating: extinction admits of no more and no less, so a graded judgment cannot be expressed in it.

9. The Watchtower’s strongest point is moral: that endless torment is incompatible with a God of love (1 John 4:8). The objection has real force *against a caricature* — a God who delights in inflicting pain. But the Catholic doctrine is not that caricature. Hell is not a torture-chamber God devises for those who sought him, but the *self-chosen* and definitive separation from God of those who refuse his love to the end. God “desires all men to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4) and condemns no one who does not, in effect, condemn himself by rejecting the only Good there is. Hell is the terrible honoring of a free creature’s final “no.”

10. On the selective application of the pagan-origins test, see the companion page “Pagan Origins?” On the Babylonian afterlife as undifferentiated rather than punitive, see the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tablet VII, where the dead dwell in darkness and eat dust without distinction of merit. Watchtower statements of the charge appear in *Let God Be True* (1952), 88–99, and *Reasoning From the Scriptures* (1985), 168–75.

11. On hell as freely chosen self-exclusion rather than divine cruelty, see Catechism of the Catholic Church §§1033, 1037: “God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end.” The “fire” of hell is the traditional image for the pain of this loss (the *poena damni*, the pain of the loss of God, being its essence); the deepest torment of hell is simply to have

refused, forever, the One in whom alone the heart can rest. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Augustine, *Confessions* I.1).

For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1033–1037 on hell; §633 on the descent to the dead. Free online at <https://uscgb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

Answering Jehovah’s Witnesses, by Jason Evert—ch. 13 treats hell directly.

Hell, Catholic Answers. Free online at <https://www.catholic.com/tract/hell>.

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“These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” — Matthew 25:46

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of the Catholic faith, drawing on Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense aligns with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.