

# A Brief History of Hell: Everything You Know Is Wrong

## CLASS HANDOUT

"For too long we've read Scripture with 19th century eyes and 16th century questions. It's time we get back to reading with 1st century eyes and 21st century questions."

– New Testament scholar N. T. Wright

➤ **The word "hell" does not occur anywhere in the Bible.**

The modern English word "Hell" is derived from Old English *hel, helle* (about 725 AD to refer to a nether world of the dead) reaching into the Anglo-Saxon pagan period, and ultimately from Proto-Germanic *halja*, meaning "one who covers up or hides something". The word has cognates in related languages such as Old Frisian *helle, hille*, Old Saxon *hellja*, Middle Dutch *helle* (modern Dutch *hel*), Old High German *helle* (Modern German *Hölle*), Danish, Norwegian and Swedish "*helvede*" / *helvete* (hel + Old Norse *vitti*, "punishment").

- **OLD TESTAMENT uses the term "Sheol" (Hebrew שְׁאוֹל) which means "The Place of the Dead" or "the grave."**
- **"Sheol" is translated in Greek First Testament as Hades, also meaning just the Place of the Dead. "Hades" is then used in the New Testament.**
- **Jesus uses the word "Gehenna," (Greek γέεννα) referring to the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom to the south of Jerusalem, a real place that was a trash dump.**

Jesus uses the word Gehenna 11 times. Gehenna γέεννα is a transliteration of an Old Testament Hebrew expression, "the valley of Hinnom," which denoted a ravine on the southern side of Jerusalem. This valley was used by certain apostate Hebrews as a place where their children were offered into the fiery arms of the pagan god Molech (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6). It was thus an area of suffering and weeping. When Josiah launched his reformation, this valley was regarded as a site of heinous abomination (2 Kgs. 23:10-14). It finally became the garbage depository of Jerusalem where there was a continual burning of refuse.



Numerous other translations follow the tradition established by the KJV. The word hell was substituted for Gehenna in Matthew 5:29 and similar scriptures, in the following versions:

- New International Version (©1984)
- New Living Translation (©2007)
- English Standard Version (©2001)
- New American Standard Bible (©1995)
- New International Version (©1984)
- International Standard Version (©2008)
- GOD'S WORD® Translation (©1995)
- American King James Version
- American Standard Version
- Bible in Basic English
- Douay-Rheims Bible
- Darby Bible Translation
- English Revised Version
- Webster's Bible Translation

“Gehenna” is left untranslated in Matthew 5:29 in the following versions:

- Weymouth New Testament
- World English Bible
- Young's Literal Translation

### **READ: Jeremiah 7:28-31**

**Gehenna was a real, literal place** that Jesus' hearers knew about and had probably visited. It was used as a garbage dump. **Maybe figuratively “it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and be cast into the Hanes Mill Road Landfill.”**

**Jewish Rabbinical Teaching:** When one has so deviated from the will of God, one is said to be *in gehinom*. This is not meant to refer to some point in the future, but to the very present moment. The gates of *teshuvah* (return) are said to be always open, and so one can align his will with that of God at any moment. Being out of alignment with God's will is itself a punishment according to the Torah. **DISCUSS:** When we are “out of sync” with the will of God, what are our lives like?

**Constantinian Shift** – After 325 AD, Christianity gradually becomes favored religion in Rome. As Christianity becomes the institutional state church, do the leaders find that FEAR is a better way to control the people than HOPE?

**Apokatastasis** – ἀποκατάστασις Ultimate return of all created beings to harmony with God. Early church fathers wrote of fire of judgment as a “fire of purification,” not destruction or punishment.

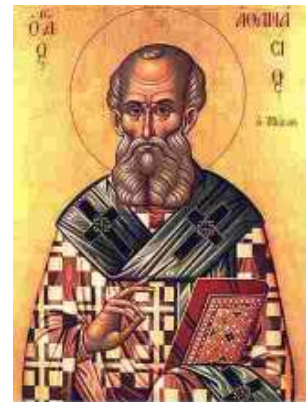
## Early Church Fathers (“Patristic Writers” – 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries)

**Clement of Alexandria** (c.150 – c. 215) - First to articulate the concept of *apokatastasis*

**Iraeneus** (Late 2nd Century) - Opposed Gnostics - Taught that Jesus became fully human to redeem every aspect of humanity, and in his incarnation and death he redeemed the whole of humanity.

**Origen** (c. 185 AD – 254) - Entire physical world is a “purgatorial discipline” created by God to give fallen minds the stimulus to return to God. The *apokatastasis* would be the final restoration of all creation to relationship with God.

**Athanasius** (c. 296 -373) - Jesus was fully human but also fully divine. Jesus has redeemed humanity as a whole, but those who ultimately reject grace move toward nothingness or annihilation of the being.



**Gregory of Nazianus** (c 325-389) Archbishop of Constantinople - Helped formulate the doctrine of the Trinity, discussed *apokatastasis*, but felt we should leave exact understanding of judgment and afterlife to God alone.



**Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 335-394) Developed theology of *apokatastasis*, image of refining fire, punishment eventually results in salvation of all.

**John Chrysostom** (c. 347–407) Accused of preaching *apokatastasis* as idea fell into disfavor, but did not. Preached against worldly “prosperity Gospel” taught instead a gospel of austerity.

**St. Augustine of Hippo** (354-430) - Rejected *apokatastasis*. Invented concept of original sin, preached eternal damnation for all fallen beings except for those redeemed by Christ. First to articulate Roman Catholic institutional church as the “City of God,” the institution as the manifestation of the Kingdom of God.

### 553 AD: 2nd Council of Constantinople declares *apokatastasis* a heresy

**Maximus the Confessor** - (580 – 662) Continued the idea of *apokatastasis* but without using the term or the same language. Human beings can reject God and experience “ill-being” instead of “well-being.” All creation would ultimately be restored to primal knowledge of God, but for those that have rejected Him, this will be a source of sorrow rather than joy.

## Major Concepts of the Afterlife

### TRADITIONAL (Middle Ages)

Some people (perhaps even a majority) will not be saved. Each person is judged once and for all at the moment of death and given either eternal life or eternal punishment. Hell is a place of endless, conscious punishment for sin. Once a person is in Hell, there is no exit. Some versions claim variations in the level of punishment depending on the severity of the sin.

Roman Catholic Church distinguishes between Hell and purgatory, a place of temporary purification for those ultimately destined for Heaven.

### Traditional - After Reformation:

LUTHER rejected purgatory but kept medieval Hell of eternal damnation.

CALVINISM emphasizes God's sovereignty in choosing who will be punished, and often teaches that certain people are PREDESTINED for damnation. Other systems emphasize the freedom of human choice.

### CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY (Annihilationism)

The human soul is not naturally immortal, eternal existence is a gift of God to the redeemed. The unrepentant will be punished, but this is temporary. At the final resurrection, the unrepentant will be destroyed and cease to exist – the Biblical “fire” is consuming rather than tormenting. Some conditionalists believe that after death a person receives a second chance to accept or reject God.

### RESTORATIONISM (Universal Salvation)

All people will eventually be saved, and God will restore the creation to perfect harmony. Eternal punishment contradicts the love of God, since God wills salvation of all. Christ's love is ultimately stronger than human resistance and sin. If there is a Hell, it is not eternal – punishment is remedial, leading the sinner to repentance & union with God.



Numerous Moravian thinkers have leaned toward Universal Salvation – notably Peter Boehler, famous for helping convert John & Charles Wesley. Boehler believed that the love of Christ was ultimately so powerful that all would be saved.

He wrote "all the damned souls shall yet be brought out of hell."

## UNIVERSALISM

All people will be saved, there is no Hell - Unitarian/Universalist Church

## CREATION SPIRITUALITY

Led by former Catholic priest Matthew Fox

- Attempts to reinterpret Scripture without Augustine's concept of "original sin"
- Regards creation as fundamentally good, everyone can be a prophet
- All are sons and daughters of God; therefore, we have divine blood in our veins, the divine breath in our lungs.
- The basic work of God is Compassion.

### C. S. Lewis speculation:

The gates of Hell are locked on the inside to keep God out, the last refuge of those who will not surrender their sins to come into the presence of the Holy. Discussed in his book, *The Problem of Pain*



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What was the concept of Hell you grew up with?
- How has your concept changed as you grew spiritually?
- Does the understanding of the Greek words change your perception of Hell and punishment?
- How does your idea of Hell counterbalance the opposing ideas?