
FAQ

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Hell, Metaphorical View

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What does your ministry think about the metaphorical view of eternal punishment? Could you explain this view to me more fully?

The **metaphorical view** of eternal punishment has a longstanding acceptance within much of Protestant Christian theology since the Reformation, even though many of today's Messianic Believers have never even heard of it. The rise of the acceptance of **annihilation**, the belief that the unrighteous condemned will suffer extinction from existence, has largely been in response to the abuses of the **literal view** of eternal punishment. The literal view advocates that the unrighteous condemned will have to suffer in an everlasting bath of being pummeled with fire and brimstone. Viewing this as a bit sadistic on the part of a loving God, annihilationists in response have advocated that the wicked will be obliterated from existence. Criticisms have necessarily been issued against annihilationism, for its inconsistencies in how it approaches the term "eternal."

The metaphorical view of eternal punishment and the literal view do share one important element in common: both positions advocate that the wicked will suffer for a never-ending eternity removed from God's presence. The main difference is that the metaphorical view of eternal punishment tries to give a much fairer hearing *to all the descriptions* presented to us in Scripture about the final destiny of the wicked. Whereas the literal view tends to focus almost exclusively on descriptions of eternal punishment as fire and smoke, the metaphorical view also takes into account the descriptions of eternal punishment as involving worms, outer darkness, and banishment. In his observations on Mark 9:44, 48,¹ Bruce Milne summarizes the various elements for us as follows:

"Hell is here 'fire [that] never goes out' (v. 44), a place where 'their worm does not die' (v. 48), and 'fire is not quenched' (v. 48) Elsewhere hell is a place of 'darkness' or 'outer darkness' (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 14); 'a lake of fire' (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8); a place where we can be 'beaten with blows' (Luke 12:47); a condition which evokes 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30); a fate describable as being 'shut out from the presence of the Lord' (2 Thes. 1:9).

"However, even when we affirm that this language is metaphorical, and the suffering concerned is accordingly essentially mental and spiritual rather than physical, the presence of some profound degree of conscious anguish is inescapable. Hell is terrible by any measure and, as Jesus indicates, everything is worth sacrificing in order to avoid it. There is no more terrible prospect conceivable than of being consigned to hell."²

Advocates of the **metaphorical view** of eternal punishment, ultimately view all of the descriptions given of the fate of the wicked, as implying eternal banishment or separation from God. While Revelation 22:14 says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city" (NASU),

¹ "where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED" (Mark 9:44/48, NASU).

² Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven & Hell* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), pp 149-150.

Revelation 22:15 further says, “Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying” (NASU). The latter group is excluded from being a part of the Kingdom of God—removed from the presence of the King of Kings for all eternity.

With time and space as human beings today know them being essentially gone in the Eternal State, the descriptions we witness of eternal punishment in the Bible have to be recognized to possess limitations. This is something recognized by the **metaphorical view**, and hopefully in future discussions on eternal punishment in our Messianic faith community, this position will be able to have a much better hearing.³

³ The metaphorical view is best summarized by William V. Crockett, in *Four Views on Hell*, pp 43-76.