



Universal Restoration vs. Eternal Torment (Hell) Introduction

Description

This article is the 1st part (*and introduction*) to a 9 part series on Universal Restoration vs Eternal Torment (hell).

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Is Hell Forever?



The obvious answer that virtually all Christians would reply immediately is "yes".

In a nutshell, the life and afterlife goes like this according to the traditional view:

You are born, and while living on earth you either come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ or don't. If you are a believer, then when you die you go to heaven and spend the rest of forever in paradise with God.

If you don't believe, then you are thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented for the rest of forever for your sins.

This is basic Christian doctrine and denying it would be considered heresy.

A while ago, a friend who loves God deeply and is very smart (*smart enough to find a mistake on an IQ test*) started questioning this doctrine. And I do mean honestly questioning. They weren't out to stir up trouble; they had legitimate concerns that our understanding of the afterlife and hell was wrong.

They had found some scripture that seemed to indicate that hell was not forever. Rather, that it was temporary punishment meant to make men repent. They said that salvation after death was possible, and therefore eventually all of mankind – even those in the lake of fire – would end up repenting, after which they could go to heaven as well.

And yes, I know that's heresy.

This view is properly called "Universal Restoration", which is sadly often confused with "Universalism". We'll define these terms in a moment.

This person shared these concerns with me and I figured I'd look into it for five minutes and solve it for them. I was wrong. Instead of a shallow "whishy-washy" theology, I found enough scripture supporting their position to dig deep.

Defining Terms:

There are essentially two different branches of Universal Restoration/Universalism. Sadly, there are no defined names for the two different branches. Thus they are often confused with each other, or even considered to be the same thing by many people.

Here is a short summary of the two branches:

- **Branch #1** was described above and believes the same as orthodox Christianity on all points except one. They believe that we can be saved after we die. They also believe that salvation after death requires the same things as salvation before death: namely repentance, faith, and confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. They believe this can take place after death in the exact same way as before death.
- **Branch #2** is the one that (*heretically*) believes that Jesus' work on the cross applies to everyone indiscriminately. They usually say that repentance, faith, and confessing Jesus as Lord is good/nice, but deny they're necessary for salvation. Historically, this second branch has often aligned itself with those who deny the Deity of Christ (*called "Unitarianism"*)

Both branches can – in a purely technical sense – correctly be called "Universalism", however they are obviously vastly different; worlds apart in theology. **Unfortunately, there are no terms to differentiate them and the second branch is what most people think of when they think of universalism.** This isn't

wrong in a purely technical sense, but paints with too broad of a brush. It's rather like thinking that everyone in Germany during WWII was a Nazi.

Obviously that's not true.

Likewise, not all "Universalists" believe the second branch, and many believe the first branch.

To be clear, we will NOT be discussing the second (*heretical*) branch of Universalism in this article series; we will only look at the first branch.

This is because the second branch has no support from scripture whatsoever, while the first arguably might.

For the remainder of this article, the terms "universalism" and "Universal Restoration" will only apply to the first branch, and never to the second.

For the sake of clarity, again here is the idea that this article series will examine in detail:

Universal Restoration agrees with the traditional view on all points view except one. They believe that hell is not "Eternal Torment", but rather "Temporary Discipline". **The Universal Restoration position believes that you can be saved after death.** That is **THE** defining difference. They believe that the lake of fire is the final and harshest thing God uses to turn wicked and unrepentant hearts toward Himself. And once a sinner in hell repents and turns toward God, they too will be saved.

In all other respects, they believe that same as Orthodox Christianity.

What follows is my research laid out with as little bias as possible. Everyone has a bias. I have tried as much as possible to keep my bias out of this paper, but I'm sure I wasn't completely successful.

To be clear I am NOT arguing for OR against either position.

Honestly, I'm writing this out to help organize my own thoughts. I always understand things better after sitting down and writing them out. This article is the result of my search for a place to "plant my doctrinal flag" on the fate of mankind in the afterlife.

(NOTE: since originally writing this article several years ago, I've made many edits as I discovered new information. Over time, it has become less unbiased as information was added, especially in articles #2 and #3. Just FYI.)

A Note on Wrath and God's view of Sin

God doesn't wink at sin.

He doesn't say "*Oh, it's okay. Don't worry about it.*"

When we sin, we offend the God of all creation with our actions. We were made in His image and designed to imitate Him. So when we sin, it's almost like we're saying "*God would do _____ sin*" (*Murder, adultery, theft, etc.*). With our sin, we declare the only Righteous God and Judge to be a wicked sinner. This rightly offends God and makes Him (*justly*) outraged.

Because of our sins, we all deserve to be fried with a lightning bolt and then roasted on a spit for all eternity.

To be clear, we deserve eternal torment.

But God is also merciful.

He rightly punishes sin in His creation, and His justice is just as much an expression of His goodness as His mercy is. **Mercy and justice met perfectly at the cross.** Through Jesus' blood our sin was cleansed and so we can have peace with God once more.

But **only** through Jesus' blood.

All (*true*) Christians agree that the only path to peace with God leads through Jesus' work on the cross. They also agree we need to repent and believe to be saved. God sometimes sends judgement and harsh punishments to turn wicked and unrepentant hearts to Himself. He also sometimes floods us with His goodness to make us repent.

In the view of Universal Restoration/Universalism "hell" is the former. It is a terrible, horrible, awful punishment God uses to bring unbelievers to repentance. **The only difference is Universal Restoration believes you can be saved after you die.** Salvation still must come through faith in Jesus. Those that don't believe in this life have a terrible fate awaiting them in the next... but after long enough in a lake of fire, they too will repent and be saved. (*in the view of Universal Restoration.*)

Until they do, they will endure the punishment of ages in the lake of fire.

Because God still doesn't wink at sin.

An Overview of Hell (*Eternal Torment*)

I will only spend a little time here because hell is a well known doctrine. **The existence of hell hinges on two points.** Without them, there's almost no foundation for the doctrine. Those two points are the use of the word "eternal" and the cultural context of the word translated "hell".

The points below are only a quick overview, NOT an in-depth treatment.

We will examine them **much** more closely in separate articles. For now, I'm just looking to give you a

brief overview.

Pillar #1: The Word Translated “Eternal”

There are several phrases which commonly come to mind when discussing hell. Phrases like “eternal punishment”, “eternal destruction”, etc. However, the word translated “eternal” doesn’t mean eternal. For example:

Matthew 24:3

3 As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the **age**?”

The word above I’ve highlighted in red is the exact same word translated “eternal” in every single verse where the duration of punishment in the afterlife is discussed. No exceptions. None whatsoever. This word (*and it’s adjective form*) are the only words used to describe the duration of punishment in the afterlife. The word means “age”, which indicates a time period with a defined beginning and end.

Every reputable Greek lexicon I could get my hands on says it means “age”. Further, the word has a plural form meaning “ages”. Does it make sense to say “eternities” or “forevers”? Once you understand the meaning of this word, you’ll realize the foundation for “eternal” torment (*hell*) rests on very shaky ground.

(Also, the “unforgivable sin” verse is the most egregious example of mis-translation in the Bible. For starters, virtually every translation omits – leaves out – three important Greek words that completely change the meaning. We’ll look at that in the next article.)

Pillar #2: The Ever-Burning Burning Garbage Pit

In several places, Jesus references “hell”. The word He uses is the Greek word Gehenna, which is a proper noun referring to the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. Most scholars agree that this valley was essentially a great burning trash heap. The people of Jerusalem would throw all their garbage into it and because it was constantly being fed, the fire would never go out.

However, this view doesn’t line up with history.

The first time anyone described “Gehenna” (*The Valley of Hinnom*) this way was over a thousand years after Christ. Further, archeologists have recently uncovered an orderly landfill outside Jerusalem in the neighboring Kidron valley. This landfill was used during Jesus’ entire lifetime and for a couple decades afterward. Further, it was designed so that it wouldn’t smell or be an eyesore.

Why would they have a great stinking, burning, sooty garbage dump on one side of Jerusalem and a

clean, orderly (*almost modern*) landfill on another side?

It makes zero sense to believe they did.

Further, the Jews had their own meaning attached to “Gehenna”. To this day, they don’t believe in eternal torment, just as they haven’t for their entire history. They believed that sins could be forgiven after death based on Isaiah 22:14, which we’ll look at in just a moment.

Once those two pillars are dealt with, you’ll see that a scriptural basis for eternal torment (*hell*) isn’t as ironclad as you’ve been taught.

An Overview of Universal Restoration

Below are some of the main pillars of the Universal Restoration school of thought.

Again, the points below are only a quick overview and is NOT an in-depth treatment. (*That’ll come in the individual articles*)

The Bible Never Says You Can’t Be Saved After Death

It’s not in there.

You can scour the book from end to end and not find it... except for possibly one parable the Jesus tells. In Luke 16, Jesus tells the parable of Lazarus and the Rich man. It makes reference to a “great chasm” between reward and punishment in the afterlife.

However, if you read it in context you will see that Jesus is making an analogy. Once you understand some context about their culture and history, the true meaning of this parable becomes obvious.

Besides, why is this the only one of Jesus parables we take literally?

Isn’t a parable a story that isn’t about the subject matter by definition?

Further, if this parable is literal you have to believe something strange. If this parable is literal, then Christians will be able to see and talk to our unsaved friends/family in the afterlife... while they are being tormented for all eternity. From heaven, you will see your loved ones tormented in hell for all time. Or at least, That what it looks like to me.

Can sins be forgiven after death?

That's what Isaiah 22:14 seems to indicate.

Isaiah 22:14

14 But the LORD of hosts revealed Himself to me, "Surely **this iniquity shall not be forgiven you Until you die**," says the Lord GOD of hosts.

God said that this sin was so bad that it couldn't be forgiven "until you die". That clearly seems to indicate that sins being forgiven after death is not only possible, but perhaps even likely.

The Gospel Has Been Preached To The Dead

Believe it or not, Jesus himself preached the Gospel to the dead. (*after His death and before His resurrection*)

1 Peter 4:6

6 For **the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead**, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

If you back up and read the context, you'll discover two things. First, Jesus did this preaching while he was "put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (*1 Pet 3:18*). So therefore He wasn't talking to men who were living. And second that the dead to whom Jesus is speaking to here were (*at least*) the evil men of Noah's day. You know, the men who were so wicked that God destroyed the entire world. Yup, those wicked men. According to this verse, they were dead and "judged in the flesh as men" but now "live in the spirit". The phrase "live in the spirit" certainly sounds like being saved to me.

This is made even more clear by a verse in Ephesians.

It talks about Jesus leading a "host of captives" on high after "descending to the lower parts of the earth" (*a common slang term for the underworld; even today we say "down to hell" vs. "up to heaven"*) We'll examine this passage in more detail in future articles.

"Enter by the gates"

It's quite interesting what the Book of Revelation has to say about the gates of heaven. (*Okay, the gates of the city on the New Earth, but conceptually they're almost the same thing.*)

Revelation 21:23-25

25 In the daytime (for there will be no night there) **its gates will never be closed**;

This is more interesting because of two other verses shortly afterward in Revelation. We'll look at verse 15 first, and then verse 14.

Revelation 22:15

15 **Outside** are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.

The city is where believers are, "outside" is where everyone else is. That's very interesting in light of the previous verse:

Revelation 22:14

14 **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.**

Wash their robes is a common Biblical terms for being saved/cleansed of sin. The tree of life is no less obvious, and notice the final bit: "enter by the gates into the city". If everyone who is outside the city is a sinner/unbeliever, and then they "wash their robes" so they can "enter by the gate into the city", and if the gates will never be shut....

Does "all" really mean "all"?

There are many verses where the Greek word for "all" appears to apply universally; that is, to everyone. Here's just one example of many, which we'll go through in a future article.

I Corinthians 15:22

22 For as **in Adam all die**, so also in Christ **all will be made alive**.

The word "all" in the first clause clearly means all men without exception. Could the "all" in the second clause mean all men without exception too? Again, many won't believe in this life and thus will have to suffer the lake of fire, but if Universal Restoration is correct then they can be "made alive" in Christ after repenting even after death.

Again, this is just one example of many verses of this type.

Jesus Watches A Torture Show for all Eternity?

Revelation 14:10-11

9 Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand,

10 he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and **he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.**

11 **"And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever (Aion of the Aion);** they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."

(Note: the words translated "forever and ever" here are the same ones who definition mean "age" that we've already talked about.)

If Eternal Torment is true, then Jesus will be standing in the midst of this torment for all eternity to watch. However, if Universal Restoration is correct, then Jesus isn't there just to watch; He's there to pull people out the moment they repent. *(like a lifeguard at a pool).*

Punishment is correction/discipline, not punishment for punishment's sake

In the New Testament, the Greek words used for "punishment" in the afterlife don't exactly mean "punishment". They come from the root word which means "to prune". When you prune something, you cut away everything that's bad for the plant in order to help it grow stronger. The end goal is the good of the plant. These are the words Jesus uses to describe the "punishment" in the afterlife. *(I think "discipline" is a better translation)*

We'll look at these words in more detail in a future article.

The Bible does use words to describe punishment for punishment's sake. For example, punishment for a crime. However, these words are never used to talk about punishment in the afterlife.

Church History

(I will prove all of the below in the article on [what The Early Church Fathers said about Universal Restoration](#))

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It might surprise you to learn that for the first ~500 years of Christianity, eternal torment in hell wasn't the most common view. In fact, the idea of eternal torment in hell was arguably a fringe idea for about 300 years after Christ. (*which I can and will prove in the article.*)

Just one quick proof.

There were six major Christian theological schools in the early church. Of them, 4 taught Universal Restoration while only 1 taught Eternal torment. There were many other minor schools, nearly all of which were founded by people who believed Universal Restoration.

Further, most of the early Church Fathers who championed the idea of Eternal torment didn't speak or read Greek. Therefore they read the New Testament Scriptures in a Latin translation instead of the the original Greek. The rise of eternal torment as a majority view coincided with the rise of Latin (*and decline of Greek*) as the common language.

In other words, Eternal Torment (*hell*) became popular when people stopped reading the original Greek and started using a Latin translation.

It may also surprise you to know that the Jewish people never believed in Eternal Torment (*hell*). They don't believe it even to this day. They have always believed that punishment in the afterlife was limited in duration. In fact, the only significant sect of Jews who ever believed in eternal torment were the Pharisees of Jesus day.

But it gets worse.

Eternal torment wasn't officially adopted until 543 AD when the Roman Emperor Justinian called a Church council to make Universalism heresy. (*By adopting an official declaration he himself wrote.*) As for Emperor Justinian's character, he murdered 30,000 innocent civilians during the [Nika riots](#) to secure his power. That's not exactly the kind of person I want dictating Church doctrine.

Therefore, a mass murderer is responsible for forcing the Church adopt Eternal Torment as it's official teaching.

(*Didn't learn that in a Church history class did you?*)

Conclusion

The above represents a very brief overview of both Eternal Torment and Universal Restoration. I will go into much more detail in the articles below. However, that should give you a good overview.

One more thing I will add. I can see how believing Universalism could theoretically produce more sincere and real Christians than believing eternal torment. Why? Because of Romans.

Romans 2:4

4 Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that **the kindness of God leads you to repentance?**

Fear of hellfire can make a person change their actions, but won't do anything for the heart. However, heart sins like hatred (*which equals murder*) need a heart change.

If the kindness of God leads you to repentance, than isn't preaching hellfire counter-productive?

I know that turns evangelism on its head, but have you ever met a Christian who was truly and deeply seeking God because they were afraid of hell?

(*I haven't.*)

The next article in this series is: [The Biggest Hole in Hell: Aion, Ages and Eternity](#)