

The Doctrine of Hell II

Universalism

Universalism is the view that every human being will, in the end, come to enjoy everlasting salvation. There are many variants to Universalism, but we'll look at Rob Bell's version from his book, Love Wins. In this view, hell exists, but it will eventually be empty.

(1) First, Rob Bell begins with the conviction that God is love (1 John 4:8).

And a loving God would never vindictively condemn people to hell for all eternity.

And so God will pursue sinners, even after they die – patiently waiting for them to repent and come back. In the end, “God’s love will win.”

Rob Bell, Love Wins (back cover)

God loves us. God offers us everlasting life by grace, freely, through no merit on our part. Unless you do not respond the right way. Then God will torture you forever. In hell. Huh?

Revelation 21:24-25

²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and **its gates will never be shut** by day – and there will be no night there.

(2) Second, there is language in the Bible that speaks of *all people* being saved:

Isaiah 25:8

He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will **wipe away tears from all faces**, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

Romans 5:18-19

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so **one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men**. ¹⁹ For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

Philippians 2:9-11

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus **every knee should bow**, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and **every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father.

(3) Furthermore, the Bible speaks of the *restoration and reconciliation* of all things.

Colossians 1:19-20

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to **reconcile to himself all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Ephesians 1:7-10

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, **to unite all things in him**, things in heaven and things on earth.

(4) But what about all the places where Jesus speaks of an “eternal” hell?

Matthew 25:41, 46 [The Sheep and the Goats]

⁴¹ Then Christ will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the **eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels...⁴⁶ And these will go away into **eternal punishment**, but the righteous into **eternal life**.”

Rob Bell, Love Wins (pg. 91-92)

The goats are sent, in the Greek language, to an aion of kolazo. Aion, we know, has several meanings. One is “age” or “period of time;” another refers to “intensity of experience.” An aion of kolazo. Depending on how you translate aion and kolazo, then, the phrase can mean “a period of pruning” or “a time of trimming,” or “an intense experience of correction.” In a good number of English translations of the Bible, the phrase “aion of kolazo” gets translated as “eternal punishment,” which many read to mean “punishment forever,” as in never going to end. But “forever” is not really a category the biblical writers used.

(5) Three major problems with Rob Bell’s Universalism:

(a) When Jesus speaks of an “eternal” hell, there’s really no getting around the language.

Mark 9:47-48

⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their **worm does not die and the fire is not quenched**.

Revelation 20:10, 15

¹⁰ and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be **tormented day and night forever and ever**. ...

¹⁵ And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

(b) If Jesus died for the people in hell, why are they still suffering punishment, even if only for awhile? Why is the same sin punished twice – once by Jesus on the cross and once by the person suffering in hell?

(c) If God will eventually convert all the people in hell, why didn’t he do it earlier while they were still alive on Earth? Why didn’t God rescue them before the suffering of hell?

Luke 16:26

And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.

Annihilationism

Annihilationism is the view that those in hell will eventually be destroyed.

Hell is not an eternal, endless torment, but a place where you are utterly annihilated and then no more.

(1) The Bible contains language describing hell to be a place of “destruction.”

2 Thessalonians 1:9

They will suffer **the punishment of eternal destruction**, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

Matthew 7:13

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to **destruction**, and those who enter by it are many.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not **perish** but have eternal life.

Psalms 37:1-2, 9-10, 20, 38

¹ Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! ² For they will soon **fade like the grass and wither like the green herb**. ⁹ For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land. ¹⁰ In just a little while, **the wicked will be no more**; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. ²⁰ But the wicked will perish; the enemies of the LORD are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish – **like smoke they vanish away**. ³⁸ But transgressors shall be **altogether destroyed**; the future of the wicked shall be cut off.

(2) Endless, eternal hell is incompatible with a God who is loving and good.

Clark Pinnock, The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent (pg. 8)

Let me say at the outset that I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition which needs to be changed. How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself. How can we possibly preach that God has so arranged things that a number of his creatures (perhaps a large number predestined to that fate) will undergo (in a state of complete consciousness) physical and mental agony through unending time? Is this not a most disturbing concept which needs some second thoughts? Surely the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is no fiend; torturing people without end is not what our God does. Does the one who told us to love our enemies intend to wreak vengeance on his own enemies for all eternity?

(3) Finally, eternal hell is a fundamentally unfair punishment for a mere lifetime of sin.

Clark Pinnock, Four Views on Hell (pg. 152)

Let readers ask themselves what lifestyle, what set of actions, would deserve the ultimate of penalties – everlasting conscious punishment? It is too heavy a sentence and cannot be successfully defended as a just action on God's part. Sending the wicked to everlasting torment would be to treat persons worse than they could deserve.

(4) Four problems with Annihilationism:

(a) The biblical language of destruction means “utter ruin,” not “ceasing to exist.”

(b) Love and holy wrath are not incompatible attributes of God.

Becky Pippert, Hope Has Its Reasons (pg. 99-100)

We tend to be taken aback by the thought that God could be angry. How can a deity who is perfect and loving ever be angry? Just look at us – we manage to be very understanding and accepting of our flaws. We take pride in our tolerance of the excesses of others. So what is God’s problem? The difficulty in pondering anything about God is that we bring our human pettiness, jealousies and problems into the analysis. We can’t help that, but it makes it difficult to imagine God having emotions similar to ours without the pollution ours brings. Even so, it may help to examine a comparable form of human anger. Think of how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward strangers? Far from it. We are dead against whatever is destroying the one we love. Love detests what destroys the beloved. Real love stands against the deception, the lie, the sin that destroys. Nearly a century ago the theologian E.H. Glifford wrote: “Human love here offers a true analogy: the more a father loves his son, the more he hates in him the drunkard, the liar, the traitor.” Anger isn’t the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference.

(c) Eternal hell seems unfair to us. But we need to consider our own self-justifying bias.

(d) Justice is not proportionate to the duration of the crime.

Notes:

Universalism

Universalism is the view that every human being will, in the end, come to enjoy everlasting salvation. There are many variants to Universalism, but we'll look at Rob Bell's version from his book, Love Wins. In this view, hell exists, but it will eventually be empty.

(1) First, Rob Bell begins with the conviction that God is love (1 John 4:8).

And a loving God would never vindictively condemn people to hell for all eternity.

And so God will pursue sinners, even after they die – patiently waiting for them to repent and come back.

In the end, “God’s love will win.”

The chief paradigm for Rob Bell is that God is love. God’s love is simply not compatible with an eternal hell. Rob Bell acknowledges there is hell, but that hell is not the final judgment. God will continue to pursue people until they repent and come into heaven. He cites Rev. 21 to show that the gates of heaven will be open forever.

(2) Second, there is language in the Bible that speaks of all people being saved:

The Bible often speaks of salvation in extremely wide terms – encompassing all of humanity.

Therefore, Bell reasons, God cannot mean that some will suffer hell forever, but will be a final salvation for all.

(3) Furthermore, the Bible speaks of the *restoration and reconciliation* of all things.

Bell interprets this biblical language of all things being “reconciled and united to Christ” as meaning the final salvation of all people.

(4) But what about all the places where Jesus speaks of an “eternal” hell?

Rob Bell questions the traditional interpretation of the Greek word for “eternal.” His argument is that in verse 46, Jesus speaks not of an “eternal” punishment, but rather a “limited time” of correction and improvement.

Hell is basically a place where people who have rejected Christ can reconsider their choice and come to their senses and finally accept the gospel. It is somewhat like the Roman Catholic teaching on purgatory. Eventually, in the end, even the hardest of hearts will come to their senses, repent, and cry out for mercy. And God will welcome them into the Kingdom of God and eternal bliss.

(5) Three major problems with Rob Bell’s Universalism:

(a) When Jesus speaks of an “eternal” hell, there’s really no getting around the language.

First, Rob Bell is completely wrong on the linguistic level. The original Greek word absolutely means “eternity.” Every single English translation agrees with this.

Second, let’s suppose for a moment we’re not sure what the Greek word means. The other descriptions should make it crystal clear that hell is forever. “The worm does not die; fire is not quenched.” In Revelation, hell is a torment “forever and ever.” The original Greek there is “*aionos* to *aionos*.” Literally, “an eternity unto an eternity.” The Bible is absolutely unambiguous about the “forever-ness” of hell. This might make us uncomfortable, and maybe the Bible is wrong, but we ought not to mess around with the original language.

Third, let’s suppose “aionos” simply means a “period of time.” Then what does that say about “eternal life”? If the goats merely go to a limited period of correction, then in the same teaching, the redeemed only go to a limited time of paradise with God.

**(b) If Jesus died for the people in hell, why are they still suffering punishment, even if only for awhile?
Why is the same sin punished twice – once by Jesus on the cross and once by the person suffering in hell?**

Rob Bell assumes something called “**Universal Atonement.**” There are 2 positions on the atonement. The Calvinist view is “Limited Atonement” – Jesus died only for the elect. The Arminian view is that Jesus died for all people, though some reject Christ. Rob Bell takes the Arminian position to its logical conclusion, which is that if Jesus died for people, they should go to heaven.

But here’s the problem. If Jesus died for them, why are they suffering hell in the first place? Why is the same sin punished twice – once by Christ on the cross and once by the sinner in hell? Why does the same sin result in two suffering the fires of hell?

(c) If God will eventually convert all the people in hell, why didn’t he do it earlier while they were still alive on Earth? Why didn’t God rescue them before the suffering of hell?

Finally, if God has the power to change hearts and cause repentance, and he can do this for those in hell, why didn’t God do this before they died? Actually, Rob Bell’s position makes God seem perversely cruel. Why not save them before they suffer hell?

Rob Bell would answer that people have free will and that God desperately wanted them to convert on Earth, but God respects people’s free will too much and so allows them to reject him. But that God will continue to pursue people in hell. But then what makes Rob Bell so confident that everyone will eventually come around? Why isn’t it possible that people will reject God forever in hell? Especially if God cannot “violate” people’s free will, what gives Rob Bell the confidence that hell will eventually be empty?

Rob Bell has painted himself into a corner. Either God can change hearts – and therefore he’s cruel to convert some people only after they suffer hell. Or, God cannot change hearts – and therefore we have no assurance that anyone will repent in hell. And in fact, we have every indication that people will choose hell forever.

This is why Jesus, in Luke 16, says there is a “great chasm” fixed between heaven and hell. Because the final judgment is final. Those in hell will forever be in rebellion against God and hate heaven.

Annihilationism

Annihilationism is the view that those in hell will eventually be destroyed.

Hell is not an eternal, endless torment, but a place where you are utterly annihilated and then no more.

(1) The Bible contains language describing hell to be a place of “destruction.”

The argument is that destruction implies a process of being destroyed and then nothingness. One annihilationalist argues that it is hard to think of someone “perishing” forever. Psalm 37 is particularly vivid in the descriptions of the damned diminishing.

(2) Endless, eternal hell is incompatible with a God who is loving and good.

This is a similar argument to Rob Bell’s Universalism. Notice that the same impulse drives both these positions – which is the great discomfort the doctrine of hell creates in people.

The basic argument is that a loving God cannot be a God who sends people to hell forever.

(3) Finally, eternal hell is a fundamentally unfair punishment for a mere lifetime of sin.

The argument is that the punishment should fit the crime. And an eternity of hell seems radically disproportionate with the crime of sin against God. Maybe a hundred years of hell. Maybe a thousand. But definitely not forever and ever.

(4) Four problems with Annihilationism:

First, Annihilationism is better than Universalism, because at least it recognizes that life outside of Christ is hell. If you reject Christ in this life, you are lost. There are no second chances in hell, unlike Rob Bell.

(a) The biblical language of destruction means “utter ruin,” not “ceasing to exist.”

An analogy would help here. When I say, “**I destroyed my car**,” I don’t mean that the car has ceased to exist, but rather that the usefulness and value of the car is totally gone.

The “destruction” of hell is that all that is good and beautiful and true in human beings (the image of God) will disappear. This does not mean the person himself will cease to exist.

(b) Love and holy wrath are not incompatible attributes of God.

This is not an either/or situation. Either God is a God of love or he is a God of wrath. He is both. He is perfectly loving and perfectly just – thus angry at sin and the marring of his beautiful creation. The fact that God is wrathful at sinners is directly a result of his loving humanity.

This touches on the earlier point about God “uniting all things” and “reconciling all things.” We have to realize that **God is glorified by the redeemed** enjoying him forever in heaven. And **God is glorified by the reprobate** suffering perfect judgment forever in hell.

(c) Eternal hell seems unfair to us. But we need to consider our own self-justifying bias.

It’s like asking death-row inmates what they think of the heinousness of murder and what the appropriate punishment should be. Of course their answer will be self-justifying and will make light of the sin. This is our predicament. As sinners, **we cannot go to God and tell him how bad sin is**. Only God, who is the one offended against, can properly tell us what sin is and what it deserves.

(d) Justice is not proportionate to the duration of the crime.

This is a very flawed way to think of justice. The time duration of the crime in no way correlates to the appropriate length of punishment. It’s not like **5 minutes of sin = 5 minutes of punishment**.

Rather, it’s **the seriousness of the crime** that matters. For example, if someone **pushes someone on the floor** and they scrap their knees – that deserves some kind of moderate punishment.

But if someone **pushes someone off a cliff** and they die – surely that deserves a much more serious punishment. Both of these crimes took the exact same amount of time. **Time is irrelevant**. What matters is what the crime is. We need to remember that sin is rebellion against the only true and good God. The fact that that sin results in an eternity of hell tells us something about how grave a crime it is.

Again, duration has nothing to do with anything. So **Christ suffered on the cross only for a few hours**. But because he suffered rejection from the Father, a suffering we cannot possibly imagine, this was equivalent to all the eternal hells of all people combined in the world – so that it is sufficient for God to forgive our sins.