

Does the Lake of Fire Symbolize Eternal Torment?

written by Alfred Persson | August 30, 2023



Does the Lake of Fire Symbolize Eternal Torment for all cast into it? When “Death and Hades” are cast into the lake of fire” they are destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26), but the Devil, Beast and False Prophet receive eternal torment (Rev. 20:10).

These different fates require the symbolism of a consuming fire that cannot be quenched (Isa. 66:24; Mk. 9:44, 46, 48) is not pertinent to the duration of whatever is cast into it; Whatever is cast in can be immediately destroyed or endure for an undetermined period of time. Their lot or destiny, “their part” (3313 μέρος meros, Rev. 21:8) of “eternity” in the lake of fire, is “according to their works” (Rev. 20:12), in proportion to their deeds.

Some would object claiming “Death and Hades” are personified in this context, but as “sea” is also listed as a *place* the dead rise from, that is impossible. In context they are places the dead rise from that God created, therefore Guilty of nothing. Their being tossed into the fire is to symbolize their destruction, never to return. Whereas Satan and crew are guilty of eternal sins, therefore, “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” (Rev. 20:10 NKJ)

*13 The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. **And they were judged, each one according to his works.***

14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:13-15 NKJ)

*“But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars **shall have their part** (3313 μέρος meros) in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the*

second death.” (Rev. 21:8 NKJ)

3313 μέρος meros {mer'-os}

Meaning: 1) a part 1a) a part due or assigned to one 1b) lot, destiny

“The sea...the death and the Hades” (ἡ θάλασσα... ὁ θάνατος καὶ ὁ Ἅδης Rev. 20:13) are different places that “give up” the dead in them. Christ has the keys to Death and Hades (Rev. 1:13) to symbolize His authority to release or lock up prisoners therein. None of the dead are left out.

Notice the wording in Revelation 20:15: “Whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire”. This is not a hypothetical “first class condition” where something is implied, to argue against it. In context, its a statement of fact. Its prose, John is reporting what he sees. John must have seen some rise whose names WERE written in the book of life (Compare Rom. 11:25-32).

Judgement Day is when some humans rise to life, and others to condemnation:

28 “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice

29 “and come forth— those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (Jn. 5:28-29 NKJ)

Those in the grave (Hades) who done good by repenting for sins done in flesh but then living according to God in the Spirit (1 Pet. 4:6) will rise to life, “that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5). Their names are written in the “book of life” and so are not cast into the lake of fire.

27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,

28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Heb. 9:27-28 NKJ)

Those who committed eternal sins while alive (Mk. 3:28-29) or refused to repent in Hades are judged according to their works. Each has a different ‘lot’ or ‘destiny’ in the lake of fire according to their works.

Different duration of torment also follows from the warning of “eternal torment” for accepting the Mark of the Beast (Rev. 14:9-11). That requires all guilty of works of lesser evil than accepting the Mark must receive “less than eternal torment” or the warning of “eternal torment” is without force. The Judgment for their different works must result in a different “part” (3313 μέρος meros) or “destiny”, “less evil work” is judged “less torment” in the Lake of Fire.

43 *'And if thy hand may cause thee to stumble, cut it off; it is better for thee maimed to enter into the life, than having the two hands, to go away to the gehenna, to the fire – the unquenchable –*
44 *where their worm is not dying, and the fire is not being quenched.*
45 *'And if thy foot may cause thee to stumble, cut it off; it is better for thee to enter into the life lame, than having the two feet to be cast to the gehenna, to the fire – the unquenchable –*
46 *where their worm is not dying, and the fire is not being quenched.*
47 *And if thine eye may cause thee to stumble, cast it out; it is better for thee one-eyed to enter into the reign of God, than having two eyes, to be cast to the gehenna of the fire –*
48 *where their worm is not dying, and the fire is not being quenched;*
(Mk. 9:43-48 YLT)

The fire is not quenched, the maggot dies not. Each symbol implies a different “destiny” or “part” (3313 μέρος meros, Rev. 21:8) “Fire that cannot be quenched” implies total destruction, “fire continually burning everlasting destruction” (compare Jude 1:7; Mal. 4:3; Isa. 26:14). “Undying worms” implies eternal torment as undying maggots require a body to continue forever. The symbol of an abominable resurrection body reeking of corruption (Isa. 66:24; Dan. 12:2; Gal. 6:8) that continues forever, communicating the wrath of an offended Holy God to the soul or angelic spirit imprisoned within for all eternity.

So “everyone” cast into Gehenna (aka Abyss, Lake of Fire) has a different destiny according to their works (Rev. 20:11-15). All sacrificed in Gehenna either are consumed by unquenchable fire (Mk. 9:43, 44, 45, 46, 48) or their worm dies not (Mk. 9:43, 44, 45, 46, 48).

49 for every one with fire shall be salted, and every sacrifice with salt shall be salted. (Mk. 9:49 YLT)

Everyone sacrificed in Gehenna is salted with destruction by fire (cp. Jude 1:7); or salted to be preserved as meat is preserved with salt.

The different “part” or “destiny” of those cast into Gehenna is evident by the threat of “eternal torment” for accepting the Mark (Rev. 14:9-11 cp. Mark 3:28-29). That requires “less than eternal torment” must exist or the threat has no force.

[The correct interpretation is clear in the Textus Receptus, the repetition of the symbols[1] aid understanding as each applies to a different category of sin unveiling it, but modern eclectic texts obscure the meaning by its deletions. See “The Revision Revised” (1881) Dr. Dean John Burgon.]

The Revision Revised pdf

The Dean Burgon Society

Likewise, Jesus’ warning against blaspheming the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of lesser evil works implies less duration of torment as never forgiving

blasphemy implies eternal torment, the contrast implying “their part” or “destiny” (3313 μέρος meros) has some reference to duration of torment.

31 “Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.

32 “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matt. 12:31-32 NKJ)

This is consistent with the destiny of some cast into the Lake of fire being one of destruction after a time of torment, but for others eternal torment without end. God has “punished and destroyed them” “according to their works” (Rev. 20:12-13). All cast into the Lake of fire suffer the “second death”, they “die the death” from which they will not rise:

They are dead, they will not live; They are deceased, they will not rise. Therefore You have punished and destroyed (08045 שָׁמַד shamad) them, And made all their memory to perish. (Isa. 26:14 NKJ)

08045 שָׁמַד shamad Meaning: 1) to destroy, exterminate, be destroyed, be exterminated -Strong's Concordance

16 Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea And a path through the mighty waters,

17 Who brings forth the chariot and horse, The army and the power (They shall lie down together, they shall not rise; They are extinguished, they are quenched like a wick): (Isa. 43:16-17 NKJ)

You shall trample the wicked, For they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet On the day that I do this,” Says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 4:3 NKJ)

A thought experiment: Let's suppose 1). That God's Mercy is absent; 2). That using God's gift of Free Will is not a work so not a factor in judgment of reward or punishment. 3). That its possible to reject Christ's offer of salvation and yet be innocent of evil works.

For example, the Bingo lady who cares nothing about Jesus, only goes to church to play Bingo. Otherwise, the Bingo lady is good person, no evil works. In that situation, when the Bingo lady is cast into the lake of fire (she rejected salvation in Christ), as torment is according to works, she wouldn't suffer any torment, like Death and Hades her destruction would be immediate and without pain.

When we factor in God's mercy, Christ's words have greater application. “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven”, it implies all not guilty of eternal sin will not suffer beyond their immediate destruction. The fire consumes totally (Mal. 4:3; Jude 1:7), they are exterminated (Isa. 26:14)

extinguished like a wick that no longer burns (Isa. 43:16-17).

28 *“Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter;*

29 *“but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation “– (Mk. 3:28-29 NKJ)*

Considering all of the above, it was a “hasty generalization fallacy” to group all the wicked into the same “eternal torment bin”. Only those guilty of eternal sin suffer eternal torment. God’s mercy would limit the torment or even remove it for everyone else. Everyone judged worthy of that punishment will be seasoned with fire that consumes unto destruction or preserved as meat is preserved salt (Mark 9:49) “according to their works” (Rev. 20:13) and not a second longer.

As these Goat survivors of Armageddon are cast into Gehenna “lake of fire” “soul and body” (Mt. 25:41-46; 18:8-9; 5:22; Mk. 9:43-47) just like the Beast and False Prophet (Rev. 19:20), the severity of this judgment implies their denial of aid to Christ’s Brethren occurred during the Great Tribulation of the church and may have crossed the line into near collaboration with the Beast, even if they did not receive the Mark or worship him (Rev. 14:9-11). The Goats have their Final Judgment before the millennial reign of Christ; denied the last opportunity to repent in Hades and rise to life on Judgment Day (John 5:28-29; Rev. 20:11-15):

41 *“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:*

42 *‘for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink;*

43 *‘I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’*

44 *“Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’*

45 *“Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’*

46 *“And these will go away into everlasting punishment (2851 κόλασις kolasis), but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matt. 25:41-46 NKJ)*

This is, however, the only time we meet the phrase “eternal punishment” in Matthew, or indeed in the whole NT. It appears to be synonymous with the “eternal fire” of v. 41 and of 18:8, and cf. the “hell-fire” of 5:22 and 18:9. All these passages raise the question whether this fire is regarded as destroying and thus annihilating those consigned to it, or as a continuing agony of conscious punishment such as is explicitly attributed to the devil, the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire in Rev 20:10 (see above on v. 41). In the debate among evangelical

theologians on the issue of annihilation as against continuing punishment,⁹⁴ the phrase “eternal punishment” here in Matt 25:46 is commonly cited as a proof-text for the latter position. But this is usually on the assumption that “eternal” is a synonym for “everlasting.” That assumption depends more on modern English usage than on the meaning of *aiōnios*, which we have seen to be related to the concept of the two ages. [2] “Eternal punishment”, so understood, is punishment which relates to the age to come rather than punishment which continues for ever, so that the term does not in itself favor one side or the other in the annihilationist debate. In so far as the metaphor of fire may be pressed, however, it suggests destruction rather than punishment, especially if the imagery of the incineration of rubbish is understood to underlie the idea of hell (see on 5:22); the fire of Gehenna goes on burning not because the rubbish is not destroyed by it, but because more is continually added. The imagery of incineration in relation to the final destiny of the wicked also occurs more explicitly in 13:42: the weeds are destroyed, not kept burning for ever. We have noted also the use of the verb “destroy” in relation to hell in 10:28. These pointers suggest that an annihilationist theology (sometimes described as “conditional immortality”) does more justice to Matthew’s language in general, and if so the sense of “eternal punishment” here will not be “punishment which goes on for ever”⁹⁶ but “punishment which has eternal consequences”, the loss of eternal life through being destroyed by fire.-France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (pp. 966–967). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

Eternally cut off does not require continuance, only a “Second Death” (Rev. 20:14) from which there is no resurrection (return). If the Lake of Fire symbolized eternal torment why did John feel the need to declare the Devil, Beast and False Prophet “will be tormented day and night forever and ever” in it? (Rev. 20:10).

The wicked are punished with “everlasting destruction from the face of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:9), that is their place before God is destroyed which implies nothing about their continuance elsewhere.

END NOTE

The Fire that Consumes

Fire can symbolize many things, including destruction:

“Therefore her plagues will come in one day— death and mourning and famine. And she will be utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judges her. (Rev. 18:8 NKJ)

They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. (Rev. 20:9 NKJ)

Fire is used throughout the scripture to imply total destruction EW Fudge

wrote a book about it titled "The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment".

The Lake of Fire symbolizes destruction, "Death and Hades" (places of the dead Rev. 20:13) are cast into the Lake to destroy them, not to torment them. These places can't be "personified" in this context because they are places the dead rise from, just as they do from "the sea":

13 The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.

14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. (Rev. 20:13-14 NKJ)

Scripture says everyone tossed into the lake receives "their part" which could be translated their "part due" what is assigned to them, their "lot, destiny"

"But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part (3313 μέρος meros) in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Rev. 21:8 NKJ)

3313 μέρος meros {mer'-os}

Meaning: 1) a part 1a) a part due or assigned to one 1b) lot, destiny 2) one of the constituent parts of a whole 2a) in part, partly, in a measure, to some degree, as respects a part, severally, individually 2b) any particular, in regard to this, in this respect.-Strong's Concordance

Therefore, everyone cast into the lake receives punishment according to their works.

12 And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.

*13 The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And **they were judged, each one according to his works.** (Rev. 20:12-13 NKJ)*

When the Beast, False Prophet, Satan are cast into the Lake they suffer eternally:

The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (Rev. 20:10 NKJ)

If the symbolism meant all tossed into the Lake of Fire receive eternal torment, then its redundant for John to add "they will be tormented

...forever.”

Details matter. Historically the Catholic church ignored these details, adopting much pagan thought about Hades. Protestants inherited that eisegesis, defending it.

God is just. He punishes according to deeds. What a surprise, the God of Justice displays justice. Go figure.

[1] Rabbinic argument in both Talmud and New Testament often employ symbol in place of premises. It is assumed the reader will realize the implication. For example, when proving the resurrection of the body Jesus cites:

26 *“But concerning the dead, that they rise, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the burning bush passage, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?”*

27 *“He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken.”*

28 *Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well... (Mk. 12:26-28 NKJ)*

At first read it seems Jesus proved life after death only, not the resurrection of the body. But from the symbol of God being the “God of the living” it is inconsistent the patriarchs remain physically dead, and therefore the resurrection of their bodies must occur because of who God is. Accordingly, the scribe declares Jesus proved the resurrection to the Sadducees “well”.

Example from Talmud:

‘ Whence is the doctrine of the Resurrection derived from the Torah? As it is said, ‘ Ye shall give the Lord’s heave-offering to Aaron the priest’ (Num. xviii. 28).

But did Aaron live for ever to receive the offering? Is it not true that he did not enter the land of Israel? Consequently the text teaches that he is to be restored to life (in the Hereafter) and will receive the heave-offering. Hence the Resurrection is deducible from the Torah’ (Sanh. 90b). – Abraham Cohen, Everyman’s Talmud (Schocken Books, NY, 1995), p 358.

[2]

V 3, p 98 κόλασις G3136κολάζω G3134 (kolazō), punish; κόλασις G3136 (kolasis), punishment.

CL J. Schneider links the original meaning of kolazō with its etymology, i.e. to maim, cut off. “Punishment is designed to cut off what is bad or disorderly” (TDNT III 814). Both the noun and the vb. were fixed terms

in Gk. *sacral jurisprudence*. In inscriptions there are references to the deity punishing violations of the cultic laws. Plato put forward the view that he who punishes aright does good, and that punishment is a blessing since it frees one from a false frame of soul (Grg. 476a ff.; cf. TDNT III 815).

OT The two terms occur chiefly in non-canonical literature. The vb. *kolazō* is without Heb. equivalent and is found in 1 Esd. 8:24; Wis. 3:4; 11:5, 8, 16; 12:14f., 27; 14:10; 16:1, 9; 18:11, 22; Sir. 23:21; Dan. 6:13 (12); 1 Macc. 7:7; 2 Macc. 6:14; 3 Macc. 3:26; 7:3, 14; 4 Macc. 2:11; 8:6; 18:5. *kolasis* stands for *miḵšôl*, cause of guilt, offense, in Ezek. 14:3, 4, 7; 18:30; 44:12. It is used in connexion with the vb. *kālam* in the niph., be put to shame, in Ezek. 43:11. It has no Heb. equivalent in Wis. 11:13; 16:2, 24; 19:4; Jer. 18:20; 2 Macc. 4:38; 3 Macc. 1:3; 4 Macc. 8:9; 13:7.

Philo distinguished between the beneficent power of God with which he made the world and which is called God, and the judicial power in virtue of which he rules what is created and which is called Lord (Rer. Div. Her. 166; cf. TDNT III 815 for further references). God's mercy is older than punishment (Deus. Imm. 76) and God prefers to forgive rather than to punish (Spec. Leg. 2, 196). Punishment is for those who will not listen to reason (Agric. 40). Both Josephus (e.g. Ant. 1, 60) and Philo speak of *kolasis* as divine retribution. For other instances in non-biblical literature see Arndt, 440. The idea of eternal punishment *kolasis aiōnios* is found in Test.Reub. 5:5.

NT Both words occur only twice each in the NT. The vb. is found in Acts 4:21 of the Jewish leaders' treatment of Peter and John: "And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people; for all men praised God for what had happened." It is used of divine chastisement in 2 Pet. 2:9: "then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment."

The noun occurs in 1 Jn. 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love." Schneider takes this to mean that "the man who lives in fear (before God) is already punished by this fear. His fear is his punishment" (TDNT III 817). He notes, however, that most commentators do not take it in this way. Rather, the meaning would seem to be that continued existence in fear is a sign of an inadequate relationship with God which is meant to exist on the plane of love. The love in question is both God's love for us and ours for him and the brethren (cf. v. 19 with 2:9ff.; 3:11–18; 4:7–12). When men live on that level, they have "confidence for the day of judgment" (v. 17).

Matt. 25:46 raises the question of eternal punishment. At the end of the parable of the sheep and the goats the Lord separates the blessed, who manifested their righteousness in practical love, from the cursed who failed to do so, not recognizing the incognito presence of Christ in the needy brethren. "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart

from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels....' And they will go away into eternal punishment [eis kolasin aiōnion], but the righteous into eternal life [eis zoēn aiōnion]" (Matt. 25:41, 46). The passage has often been cited in support of the doctrine of endless torment. But it may be questioned whether it implies more than the finality of judgment. The term eternal has both qualitative and quantitative overtones (→ Time, art. ἐλαιών). Jesus did not teach, like Plato and others, that the → soul was intrinsically immortal and that it would necessarily go on after death. References to the eternal → fire (Matt. 18:8; cf. Mk. 9:43–48; Jude 7) are necessarily figurative.

In attempting to determine the meaning of such passages, attention needs to be paid to semantics and the philosophical analysis of the structure and function of language. The words "life" and "judgment" are what I. T. Ramsey called models which describe something in familiar terms which is, in fact, not capable of being described in a purely literal way. For although eternal life can be entered into now, its future character lies hidden beyond this life. The word "eternal" is what Ramsey termed a qualifier which serves as a directive to understand the model in a special way (*Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases*, 1957, 61 f.; cf. also *Freedom and Immortality*, 1960, 91–148). The qualifier is not simply a literal description of the noun but a reminder that it is being used in a non-literal sense (cf. such phrases as "heavenly Father", "infinite love"). Similarly the phrase "eternal sin" (Mk. 3:29) does not mean an endless sin but one which has dimensions and ramifications beyond the present life.

Eternal → judgment is referred to in Heb. 6:2 and 2 Thess. 1:9. This, like the idea of eternal fire, does not necessarily imply that those concerned go on being judged or continue to be consumed. If the metaphor of fire is to be pressed at all, it would imply that the fire of righteousness continues to burn, but that what is consumed once is consumed for good (cf. also Paul's observation about works being consumed by fire, 1 Cor. 3:15)-Brown, C. (1986). κολλασις. In L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther, & H. Bietenhard (Eds.), *New international dictionary of New Testament theology* (Vol. 3, pp. 98–99). Zondervan Publishing House.

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