

PROJECT TITLE: HOPE AFTER DEATH  
PROGRAM TITLE: OBLIVION?  
SPEAKER: DR. DWIGHT NELSON  
WRITER/PRODUCER: JIM WOOD  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: PAT ARRABITO

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They say some people will burn forever in the flames of hell.

They say that God will keep sinners alive forever so He can torture them.

They say that divine justice requires never-ending torment.

Who are THEY?

THEY are priests and professors, preachers and Sunday-school teachers - people of influence in the Christian world who uphold traditional church teachings

Listen carefully. You might hear the echo of their beliefs in an 18th-century gospel song written by Isaac Watts:

“What bliss will fill the ransomed souls,  
When they in glory dwell,  
To see the sinner as he rolls,  
In quenchless flames of hell.”

The song gives voice to a pillar of their faith: The doctrine of Eternal Conscious Torment.

Eternal. Conscious. Torment!

Those three words can send chills up and down the spines of believers. They call up grotesque images of lost souls writhing in never-ending agony while devils and demons stoke the hellish fires.

I’d like to throw some cold water on that picture. But first, a Spoiler Alert!

Things do not end well for those who reject God’s gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

See, it’s right here in the most famous verse in all the Bible, John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16 NKJV).

Look at that word, “perish.” Take its most common, ordinary meaning. “It means to die.”

John 3:16 tells us that there are two possible outcomes. Everlasting life. Or, death.

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St. Paul says the same thing in other words:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord”  
(Romans 3:23 NKJV).

Again, two destinies for the saved and the lost. In fact, two opposite destinies. Eternal life. Or death.

The contrast cannot be overstated. Life. Death. Lights on. Lights out. Forever.

It’s eternal, conscious joy and happiness on one hand. Oblivion on the other.

Simple, right? So what’s the problem? Does the Bible give a mixed message? No! But church traditions have distorted the truth. How on earth did that happen?!

We have to go back to the first centuries of Christianity. Converts to the new church brought in their traditional views of life and death and the hereafter – ideas we can trace directly to classical Greek philosophers and their hellish visions of the afterlife.

The church, over time, adopted these pagan ideas, and ultimately, Eternal Conscious Torment became a key doctrine of the powerful Roman Catholic branch of Christianity. And that’s where today’s common views of hell and torment came from. When Protestant Reformers later broke away from the Church of Rome, they took the doctrine of Eternal Conscious Torment with them.

In recent years many Bible scholars have taken a new look at this. Theologians across the spectrum, from Catholic to mainline Protestant to Bible-belt fundamentalists, are challenging the traditional view of Eternal Conscious Torment. They’re asking some hard questions.

Would a just and loving God inflict unending torture on a man who had sinned for, say, seventy years? Would that be fair? Would that sentence fit the crime?

“Dwight, you’re missing the point!” you say. “Sin against the infinite God demands infinite punishment!”

Yes, I’ve heard that, too. It’s an old, medieval view of justice, where a crime against a lord is more serious than the same crime committed against a commoner. But this contradicts the biblical principle of justice, where the punishment must fit the crime. As in, An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth.

Here’s another big question:

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Can an eternally burning hell exist in a perfect universe? Not according to the word of God. Here in Revelation 21:4 it tells us that “there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying . . . nor pain” (Revelation 21:4 NKJV).

“Wait a minute!” you say. “Does that mean the wicked don’t suffer eternally? That their punishment is just oblivion?”

No, not at all. What it means is that their punishment ENDS in oblivion. The Bible calls it “the second death.” It’s a death from which there will be no awakening.

Jesus used several word pictures to describe it. Take your pick. Gehenna. Fire. Destruction. Perish. Outer darkness. Exclusion from the Kingdom of God. Loss of eternal life.

These are complementary images. They all are about finality. They depict an event that cannot be undone, a place from which there can be no return, a condition that cannot be reversed. They all lead, ultimately, to oblivion.

And oblivion means everlasting non-existence. Those who are “lost” will not experience eternity – not in heaven and not in hell. They will have no part in the perfect life in the perfect world that God has in store for all who accept His gift of salvation.

They will miss endless life as the ceaseless ages of eternity roll by. They will miss the joyful life of the saved who will never grow old or sick or feeble. They will forfeit the company of friends and loved ones, the companionship of angels, and fellowship with the Creator Himself.

The ultimate price they pay for their sins is surpassed only by the cost to God Himself: the eternal loss of human beings He created and loved. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to rescue them, to save them from the fatal power of sin – and they said No.

And so He has to let them go. Into oblivion. Forever.

Friend, you don’t have to pay that price. Jesus Christ paid it for you; He died so you could have eternal life. Everyone who accepts Him as their Savior will receive His gift of everlasting life. Why should any of us miss out?