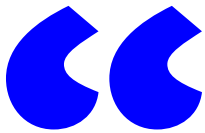


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**A PARENT'S GUIDE TO**

# **TALKING ABOUT HELL**



If hell is some primitive myth left over from conservative tradition, then let's set it on that dusty shelf next to other traditional beliefs that have no basis in Scripture. But if it is true, if the Bible does teach that there is a literal hell awaiting those who don't believe in Jesus, then this reality must change us.

— Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell*

A Parent's Guide to  
**PURPOSE**

**Contents**

This guide will help you discuss these questions..... 4  
Introduction..... 5  
A Passion for Justice ..... 5  
What is Hell? ..... 6  
Why do people believe in Eternal Conscious Torment? ..... 7  
Why do people believe in Universal Reconciliation? ..... 8  
Why do people believe in Annihilationism?..... 10  
Summary ..... 13  
Additional Resources..... 15

A Parent's Guide to

# **TALKING ABOUT HELL**

**This guide will help you discuss these questions...**

- How does Gen Z's passion for justice shape their view of Hell and the afterlife?
- How is Hell represented in pop culture? What about Christian culture?
- What is the "eternal conscious torment" view of Hell?
- What is the "universal reconciliation" view of Hell?
- What is the "annihilationist" view of Hell?
- What is Hell for? What does Hell have to do with Jesus?

## Introduction

A friend of ours named Christy grew up in a Christian home, and then met a girl named Anna in college. Anna was very kind and generous. She was also an atheist, and said that she could never believe in a God who intended to send the vast majority of human beings to burn in Hell forever. As Christy tried to explain the concept of Hell to her friend, and Jesus' role in ransoming us, Christy began to be consumed with doubts herself. Would God really send someone like Anna to Hell just because she didn't believe in Jesus?

In time, Christy would walk away from her faith altogether—but many members of Gen Z aren't even growing up with a faith to walk away from. "Gen Z is different because they have grown up in a post-Christian, post-modern environment where many of them have not even been exposed to Christianity or to church," [according to Brooke Hempell](#). Barna's [research on Gen Z](#) reports that "35 percent of Generation Z teens considered themselves to be atheist, agnostic or not affiliated with any religion. By comparison, only 30 percent of millennials, 30 percent of Generation X and 26 percent of Baby Boomers said the same."

This not only means that 1 in 3 Gen Zers did not grow up in a Christian household where ideas like Hell were discussed and processed, but also that 1 in 3 may be teens just like Anna—kind, generous atheists against whom our teens' ideas of the afterlife may be tested.

Passing on the legacy of faith to the next generation means passing on all of it. And although, frankly, we don't recommend leading with this topic, in conversation about our faith it is bound to come up eventually. We hope this guide can help parents and caring adults answer questions and spark conversation.

## A Passion for Justice

Gen Z has been called "[the activist generation](#)." [Research](#) suggests that 64% of Gen Z wants to work for a company that is speaking up for or addressing social justice issues. Where it's seen as lacking, Gen Z sees their role as [reforming](#) systems to better facilitate justice, as they understand it.

We needn't agree with all the ways Gen Z might define justice to be inspired by their passion to see it in our world. Jesus, after all, taught us [to pray](#), "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven." But on the flipside, as Gen Z becomes more and more preoccupied with eradicating the hells we create for ourselves on Earth, it can also mean many care less and less about seeing this life in the context of eternity. As Rob Bell put it in his book *Love Wins*, "Often the people most concerned about others going to hell when they die seem less concerned with the hells on earth right now, while the people most concerned with the hells on earth right now seem the

least concerned about hell after death.”

And yet, the reality is that our attempts to create Heaven on Earth will always be imperfect. This doesn't mean we shouldn't work toward justice, but it means that there will always be people who slip through the cracks—innocent people who are condemned, guilty people who are acquitted, and unintended side effects of our attempts to create a better society.

God's justice, on the other hand, is perfect. Romans 2:6 says that “God will repay each person according to what they have done.” He is “a Father who judges each person's work impartially” (1 Peter 1:17). “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of [His] throne” (Psalm 89:14). Hell, as terrible as it may be to contemplate, is part of God enacting His perfect justice in a world that has gone so long without it.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- Is it possible to care about the hells on earth now and eternal life/death?
- Why do you think it so easily turns into an either/or question for people?

## **What is Hell?**

At least since Satan became a [recurring character on South Park](#), Hell has been represented in pop culture as something to mostly joke about and not take too seriously. In 2021, Lil Nas X released a music video for his song “MONTERO (CALL ME BY YOUR NAME),” which included scenes of Him sliding down a pole into Hell, giving Satan a lap dance, killing him, and then apparently taking his place. The image of Hell as something that a human being might overcome by his own strength is a consistent theme in pop culture's representation of it.

When *The Good Place* came out in 2017, its portrayal of the afterlife included a cosmic points system, where every good deed added points, every bad deed took away points, and someone's eternal destination was a function of how many points they had at the end of their life. This perspective essentially provides a spiritual twist on the humanist worldview that is generally taken as a modern default, as Laura Turner summarized for [The Outline](#):

“There is something deeply comforting in the straightforward layout here—good people, so determined by the innate goodness of their actions, will go to The Good Place, and bad people to the Bad Place. We are all subject not to some abstract, mysterious God requiring faith and trust, but to an all-knowing algorithm—and in an age where the locus of capitalism is moving away from Wall Street and into Silicon Valley, what more appropriate object of our faith could there be?”

Some Christians are disturbed by such unbiblical accounts of the afterlife. At the same time, through history, the Christian imagination has been just as informed by pop culture—albeit in forms like Dante Alighieri’s [Divine Comedy](#), John Milton’s [Paradise Lost](#) and C.S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*. In general, however, the majority of Christians and theologians have tended to land on [one of three views](#) about what Hell is actually like. In the next several pages, we’re going to unpack the scriptural rationale for each of these views.

The first view is the “Eternal Conscious Torment” view (also called the “Traditional” view), which is the idea that sinners will be preserved forever in Hell to experience never-ending punishment for their lack of repentance during our lifetime.

The second view is the “Universal Reconciliation” view, which is the idea that eventually, in the end, no-one will be in Hell because God’s love will win out and save everyone. (Some varieties of Universal Reconciliation also make space for a temporary, ‘purgative’ time in Hell.)

The third view is the “Annihilationist” view, also known as “Conditional Immortality,” which is the idea that immortality is not something any human being possesses by default, and that without Christ’s gift of eternal life, those who do end up in Hell will be annihilated after a time.

As we unpack the rationale for each of these views, our goal is not to offer them up to readers’ preference so that we choose whichever view we happen to like most. Rather, we invite readers to pray, seek the scriptures, and seek the Lord, to discover which view is true. Acts 17:11 describes a group called the Bereans, who were “of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” We encourage you to follow their example. As we do so, we believe that we’ll be in a better position to converse with Gen Z about this very important topic.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- How else have you seen Hell/the afterlife represented in pop culture?
- Which of these three views of Hell have you tended to hold?
- Were you familiar with the other two?

## **Why do people believe in Eternal Conscious Torment?**

The Eternal Conscious Torment view of Hell is arguably the most disturbing view of the three—and proponents of this view will often say that it should be disturbing, because the sin that it punishes is just that egregious. Some have questioned whether this view could truly square with the idea that God is loving and just; but as writer Flannery O’Connor once put it, “Truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.”

Here are a few of the verses often used in support of this view of Hell:

- “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” - Matthew 25:46
- “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth...” - Luke 13:28
- “And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name.” - Revelation 14:11
- “...where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” - Mark 9:48

Just as eternal life is usually taken to mean “unending life” in Matthew 25:46, so too is eternal punishment taken to mean “unending punishment.” Critics of the annihilationist view of Hell point to verses like Luke 13:28 and Revelation 14:11, which clearly suggest that people will be conscious enough to weep, gnash their teeth, and feel a lack of rest. As John Blanchard puts it in his book *Whatever Happened to Hell?*, the “worm” mentioned in Mark 9:48 should be understood as referring to a maggot—“a worm constantly gnawing at those who are condemned to spend eternity there.”

Jonathan Edwards puts it this way, in his sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”:

‘Tis everlasting wrath! It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment. But you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul, and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all!

Many Christians who mentally assent to this view of Hell then generally try to avoid thinking about it unless they have to. Some have chosen to reject it in favor of the next view, though not always because of rigorous scriptural and theological study, but sometimes because it just seems more pleasant. There are, however, [some theologians](#) who believe that Universal Reconciliation is the correct view.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- How might this view of Hell shape someone's view of God, sin, justice, and judgment?
- When your teen talks about Hell, is this the view they have in mind?

## **Why do people believe in Universal Reconciliation?**

Of the three views of Hell, this is the view which has most commonly been condemned as heretical. It was for asking questions about this view, and apparently promoting it,



that Rob Bell was called a heretic after publishing his book *Love Wins*. As a sampling, in the book Bell quotes 1 Timothy 2:3-4, which says, "This is good, and pleases God our savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." After quoting this verse, Bell asks the reader a question: "Does God get what God wants?"

Without getting too far into debates about sovereignty and free will, here are some of the verses used in support of the Universal Reconciliation view:

- "That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the savior of all people, and especially of those who believe." - 1 Timothy 4:10
- "He himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." - 1 John 2:2
- "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." - 1 Corinthians 15:22 (emphasis ours)

1 Timothy 4:10 is interpreted, pretty straightforwardly, as saying that believers in Jesus are not the only ones who will be saved. 1 John 2:2 is seen as taking that inclusion to the ultimate extent: not only is Jesus' atoning sacrifice effective for the sins of the church that John was writing to, but it is effective for the sins of the entire world. In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul appears to be drawing a parallel between sin and eternal life. Just as Adam's decision to eat the forbidden fruit subjected everyone to death and to our proclivity toward sin, so now here, according to the Universal Reconciliation view, Christ's sacrifice has the same sort of universal effect that Adam's rebellion did—only in the opposite direction.

Again, just as truth doesn't change according to our ability to stomach it, it also doesn't change according to how preferable we might find it to be. That said, it's too easy to label someone who believes in Universal Reconciliation a heretic without taking the time to wrestle with verses like these. If these verses don't mean what they appear to mean, what do they mean? John Stott famously used texts like these to point out weaknesses in the Eternal Conscious Torment view, though he ultimately didn't land in either camp. He wrote:

"...the eternal existence of the impenitent in hell would be hard to reconcile with the promises of God's final victory over evil, or with the apparently universalistic texts which speak of Christ drawing all men to himself (John 12:32), and of God uniting all things under Christ's headship (Eph 1:10), reconciling all things to himself through Christ (Col 1:20), and bringing every knee to bow to Christ and every tongue to confess his lordship (Phil 2:10-11), so that in the end God will be "all in all" or "everything to everybody" (1 Cor 15:28). These texts do not lead me to universalism, because of the many others that speak of the terrible and eternal reality of hell. But they do lead me to ask how God can in any meaningful sense be called "everything to everybody" while an unspecified number of people will continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment."

That last section is important. A consistent hermeneutic about Hell should include passages that confirm the perspective, and also a satisfactory way of understanding passages that appear to contradict it. Stott recognized that those who hold the Universal Reconciliation view don't often have a way of satisfactorily addressing the Bible's numerous references to Hell without essentially calling them empty threats. Ultimately, Stott landed on our third perspective—that of Annihilationism, a.k.a. Conditional Immortality.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- How might the Universal Reconciliation view of Hell shape someone's view of God, sin, justice, and judgment?

## **Why do people believe in Annihilationism?**

Most of the debate about Hell tends to be between the first two views—between traditionalists who see sin as so egregious that ECT is warranted, and other groups who insist that the love of God could never truly condone the existence of an eternal Hell. For our third perspective, Annihilationists believe that Hell is real, and that unrepentant sinners will go there, but that eventually those who are there will be completely consumed—i.e. Annihilated—because immortality is not something human beings possess by default.

Here are some of the verses used in support of the Annihilationist view of Hell:

- “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.” - Romans 2:7
- “...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and lives in unapproachable light...” - 1 Timothy 6:15-16
- “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell.” - Matthew 10:28 (emphasis ours)

According to the Eternal Conscious Torment view, all human beings have an immortal, imperishable soul; the only question is whether that immortal soul will live forever in Heaven/the New Earth or will experience unending punishment in Hell. Annihilationists, on the other hand, see that idea as an infiltration by Greek philosophy, and do not believe the Bible teaches that human beings are inherently immortal. When Paul writes in Romans 2:7 that those who persist in doing good “seek immortality,” the implication for annihilationists is that immortality isn't something that human beings have by default—it is something we have to seek. When 1 Timothy 6:16 says that God “alone is immortal,” annihilationists take that as meaning that God is the only one who has immortality by default. Jesus' words in Matthew 10:28 about the destruction of both body and soul in Hell are taken to be literal—the soul will actually be destroyed, not subjected to a

process of continual destruction.

But what does it mean that the punishment of Hell is described as eternal in verses like Matthew 25:46? Edward Fudge, author of *The Fire That Consumes*, puts it this way:

Of the seventy occurrences of the adjective "eternal" in the NT, six times the word qualifies nouns signifying acts or processes rather than persons or things. The six "eternal" acts or events are salvation (Heb 5:9), judgment (6:2), redemption (9:2), sin (Mark 3:39), punishment (Matt 25:46), and destruction (2 Thess 1:9). In four of the six, "eternal" refers to the results or outcome of the action and not the action itself. "Eternal judgment" does not mean that the judging will last forever, but that its outcome will. "Eternal redemption" does not mean that the process goes on without end—for the redemptive work was done once and for all—but that its issue will have no end forever. The "everlasting destruction" (2 Thess 1:9) of the wicked does not mean that Christ will be forever in the process of destroying them but that their destruction, once accomplished, will be forever. The wicked will never reappear.

In other words, according to Annihilationism, just as the "eternal judgment" spoken of in Hebrews 6:2 refers to a once-and-for-all judgment, and not to a judgment that is continually in the process of happening, verses about eternal punishment should also be taken as referring to a once-and-for-all punishment (which eventually ends in annihilation), and not to a punishment which is continually in the process of happening.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- Which of the three perspectives do you find to be most persuasive overall? Why?
- Can you think of any other verses about Hell or eternal punishment?
- Which interpretation do you think fits those verses best?

## **Conclusion**

In their book *Erasing Hell*, Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle write,

The debate about hell's duration is much more complex than I first assumed. While I lean heavily on the side that says it is everlasting, I am not ready to claim that with complete certainty. I encourage you to continue researching, but don't get so caught up in this debate that you miss the point of what Jesus was trying to communicate... Jesus didn't speak of hell so that we could study, debate, and write books about it. He gave us these passages so that we would live holy lives.

In Gen Z's passion for justice, it can be easy to forget that the moral nature of human beings is always profoundly mixed. Though it may be tempting for some to define morality according to group identity, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag*

Archipelago.

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

The dividing line between good and evil is not between one group and another, but between the two sides of every human heart. [Romans 3:23](#) says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace that came through the redemption by Christ Jesus." Jesus came to offer us this grace and redemption, because we all need it.

And yet, Hell is not simply a punishment to escape; it also represents the complete and total destruction of everything that keeps us from being who God created us to be. In [Matthew 13:41](#), Jesus says, "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil." All causes of sin and evil will be removed, once and for all, so the church can flourish in the way God intended it to flourish.

This topic should be a sobering one. And yet, as you pray, study, and seek the Lord on this matter, remember most of all that Jesus came to redeem us and restore us—as John 3:17 puts it, "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." That mission is for you and your teens, too.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- Do you know anyone who has walked away from the faith because of the idea of Hell?
- Does that reaction make sense to you?
- Do you know anyone whose belief in Hell has actually helped their faith? Does that reaction make sense to you?

# A Parent's Guide to **TALKING ABOUT HELL**

## Summary

- Barna's [research on Gen Z](#) reports that "35 percent of Generation Z teens considered themselves to be atheist, agnostic or not affiliated with any religion. By comparison, only 30 percent of millennials, 30 percent of Generation X and 26 percent of Baby Boomers said the same."
- Passing on the legacy of faith to the next generation means passing on all of it. And although, frankly, we don't recommend leading with this topic, in conversation about our faith it is bound to come up eventually.
- As Gen Z becomes more and more preoccupied with eradicating the hells we create for ourselves on Earth, it can also mean many care less and less about seeing this life in the context of eternity.
- In our human attempts to enact justice, there will always be innocent people who are condemned, guilty people who are acquitted, and unintended side effects of our attempts to create a better society. God's justice, on the other hand, is perfect.
- Hell, as terrible as it may be to contemplate, is part of God enacting His perfect justice in a world that has gone so long without it.
- At least since Satan became a [recurring character on South Park](#), Hell has been represented in pop culture as something to mostly joke about and not take too seriously.
- In general, the majority of Christians and theologians have tended to land on [one of three views](#) about what Hell is actually like.
- The "Eternal Conscious Torment" view (also called the "Traditional" view) is the idea that sinners will be preserved forever in Hell to experience never-ending punishment for their lack of repentance during our lifetime.
- The "Universal Reconciliation" view is the idea that eventually, in the end, no-one will

be in Hell because God's love will win out and save everyone.

- The "Annihilationist" view, also known as "Conditional Immortality," is the idea that immortality is not something any human being possesses by default, and that without Christ's gift of eternal life, those who do end up in Hell will be annihilated after a time.
- A consistent hermeneutic about Hell should include passages that confirm the perspective, and also a satisfactory way of understanding passages that appear to contradict it.
- The dividing line between good and evil is not between one group and another, but between the two sides of every human heart. [Romans 3:23](#) says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace that came through the redemption by Christ Jesus." Jesus came to offer us this grace and redemption, because we all need it.



## Additional Resources

- [A Parent's Guide to Talking About Death](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to The Bible](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Discipling Teens](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to A Doubting Teen](#)
- [Doubt Conversation Kit](#)
- [Spiritual Warfare Conversation Kit](#)