Fulfilled Prophecies

What Does Scripture Say Ultimately Happens To Those Who Reject Christ?



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† One of the most important questions we can ask is what ultimately happens to those who reject Jesus Christ. For centuries, Christians have debated whether unbelievers experience eternal conscious torment, eventual reconciliation, or complete destruction. However, our understanding must come from Scripture rather than church traditions or frightening descriptions of hell.

† Jesus repeatedly contrasted eternal life with perishing, destruction, and death. Paul taught that the wages of sin is death, while John described the final punishment of the wicked as the second death. These descriptions deserve careful examination because they explain the ultimate consequences of rejecting Christ (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Revelation 21:8).
† From the fulfilled perspective, we must also recognize that the prophetic judgments described in Revelation belonged to the first-century fulfillment of God's covenant promises. Jesus declared that all things written concerning Jerusalem's judgment would be fulfilled in that generation. We shouldn't move those prophecies thousands of years into our future (Luke 21:20-22; Matthew 24:34; Revelation 22:10).
† The central question isn't whether God judges unbelief. Scripture clearly teaches that He does. The question is whether that judgment results in endless conscious suffering or the permanent loss of life. When we examine the biblical language of death, destruction, perishing, and eternal punishment, we find strong support for understanding the ultimate punishment as irreversible destruction (Matthew 10:28; 2 Thessalonians 1:9).

John 3:16
For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.
† Jesus presented two opposite outcomes, perishing and eternal life. He didn't describe unbelievers as receiving eternal life in another location. Eternal life belongs to those who believe in Him (John 3:36).
† The word translated perish comes from the Greek word apollymi, which can describe destruction, loss, or ruin. Its meaning depends on context, but here it stands in direct contrast to eternal life (Matthew 7:13).
† If everyone continues living consciously forever, regardless of whether they believe in Christ, we must explain why Jesus specifically contrasted perishing with possessing eternal life. His

statement supports the understanding that immortality is a gift received through Him (Romans 6:23; 1 John 5:12).

Romans 6:23
For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
† Paul didn't say the wages of sin is eternal life in torment. He said the wages of sin is death. The contrast is between what sin earns and what God freely gives through Jesus Christ (John 3:16).
† Eternal life isn't presented as something everyone automatically possesses. It's God's gift through Christ. Those who reject Him reject the only source of that life (1 John 5:11-12).
† Death is the opposite of life, not another form of everlasting life. From this perspective, the final punishment of unbelievers is the permanent loss of life rather than endless conscious existence in suffering (Matthew 10:28; Revelation 21:8).

Matthew 10:28
Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.
† Jesus distinguished between human beings who can kill the body and God, who possesses authority over both body and soul. God's judgment reaches beyond anything human beings can accomplish (Luke 12:4-5).
† The Greek word translated destroy is apollymi. Jesus didn't describe God merely imprisoning the soul forever. He warned that God possesses the power to destroy both soul and body (John 3:16).
† This passage presents a serious challenge to the belief that every human soul is naturally indestructible. Jesus specifically taught that God has authority to destroy the entire person (Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 6:23).
† The word translated hell is Gehenna, a term associated with the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. Jesus used this

familiar location to communicate the seriousness of divine judgment. We shouldn't automatically assume that every reference to Gehenna describes an underground chamber where people remain conscious forever (Jeremiah 7:31-33; Matthew 23:33-36).

Matthew 7:13
Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it.
† Jesus identified destruction as the destination of the broad road. He didn't describe that destination as another kind of eternal life (John 3:16).
† The Greek word apoleia, translated destruction, emphasizes ruin or loss. In this context, it stands opposite the life associated with the narrow way (Matthew 7:14).
† The warning remains meaningful today because rejecting Christ means rejecting the life available through Him. The consequences aren't temporary or insignificant (John 14:6; 1 John 5:12).

1 John 5:12
He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.
† John made the distinction unmistakable. Those who have the Son possess life, while those who don't have the Son don't possess that life (John 3:36).
† Scripture doesn't teach that everyone automatically possesses eternal life. The promise of everlasting life belongs to those who are united with Jesus Christ (Romans 6:23).
† If eternal life is found only in Christ, then rejecting Him means remaining outside the life He provides. That's why the biblical warnings about perishing and destruction must be taken seriously (John 3:16; Matthew 10:28).

2 Thessalonians 1:9
These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the

presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,
† Paul described the penalty as eternal destruction. The word eternal describes the lasting nature of the punishment, while destruction identifies the penalty itself (Matthew 25:46).
† Eternal destruction doesn't necessarily mean an endless process of being destroyed without ever reaching completion. It can describe destruction whose consequences can never be reversed (Hebrews 6:2).
† The immediate context concerns persecutors of the first-century church and the promised revelation of Jesus Christ in judgment. Paul was addressing real suffering among believers living in his own generation (2 Thessalonians 1:4-8).
† From the fulfilled perspective, that historical judgment must be understood within the approaching end of the Old Covenant age. Nevertheless, the language also reveals the seriousness and permanence of God's judgment against those who reject Him (Matthew 24:34; Hebrews 10:37).

Matthew 25:46
These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.
† This passage is frequently used to defend eternal conscious torment because Jesus placed eternal punishment alongside eternal life. However, He didn't specifically say eternal torment. He said eternal punishment (Romans 6:23).
† Punishment and the experience of being punished aren't necessarily identical. A punishment can have permanent consequences without requiring an endless conscious experience. Eternal destruction is one example of that distinction (2 Thessalonians 1:9).
† Jesus delivered this teaching within the Olivet Discourse, which concerned the judgment approaching His generation. The separation of the sheep and goats must first be understood within that prophetic setting (Matthew 24:34; Matthew 25:31-33).
† The fulfilled perspective recognizes the first-century fulfillment of that judgment without denying the continuing truth that

eternal life belongs to those who are Christ's (John 5:24; 1 John 5:12).

Malachi 4:1
For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.
† Malachi compared the wicked to chaff consumed by fire. The picture is one of complete destruction, not an indestructible substance burning forever (Matthew 3:12).
† The expression neither root nor branch emphasizes the completeness of the judgment. Nothing remains from which the condemned order can grow again (Isaiah 5:24).
† Malachi's prophecy also anticipated the coming of Elijah before the great day of the Lord. Jesus identified John the Baptist as the Elijah who was to come, connecting the prophecy with the first-century fulfillment (Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 11:13-14; Matthew 17:12-13).

Malachi 4:3
You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing, says the LORD of hosts.
† The imagery of ashes describes the completed result of burning. Malachi didn't describe wicked people remaining alive in the flames forever (Malachi 4:1).
† Fire is frequently used in Scripture as an instrument of judgment that consumes what is condemned. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah provides another example of this language (Genesis 19:24-25; Jude 7).
† We must recognize that Malachi was describing prophetic judgment rather than providing a detailed explanation of the condition of every unbeliever after physical death. Nevertheless, his imagery supports destruction rather than endless preservation in suffering (Matthew 10:28).

Obadiah 1:16
Because just as you drank on My holy mountain, All the nations will drink continually. They will drink and swallow And become as if they had never existed.
† Obadiah described judgment against the nations using language of complete disappearance. They would become as though they had never existed (Jeremiah 25:15-17).
† The original prophecy concerned historical nations and their judgment. We shouldn't remove that context and claim Obadiah was directly describing every unbeliever's afterlife (Obadiah 1:1; Obadiah 1:15).
† Nevertheless, the language demonstrates that God's judgment can be described as complete destruction rather than endless conscious suffering (Malachi 4:1-3).

Revelation 20:14-15
Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.
And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.
† John explicitly identified the lake of fire as the second death. He didn't call it the second life or describe it as another form of eternal life (Revelation 21:8).
† Death and Hades themselves were thrown into the lake of fire. Since death and Hades aren't physical people who can experience bodily torment, this imagery clearly communicates the destruction of powers and conditions associated with the former order (1 Corinthians 15:26).
† From the fulfilled perspective, this judgment belongs to the completion of the Old Covenant age in AD 70. The resurrection and judgment described in Revelation were connected to the time John repeatedly declared was near (Daniel 12:1-2; Revelation 1:1-3; Revelation 22:10).
† The second death represents final exclusion from the life God provides. Revelation's symbolism shouldn't be used to create a future judgment thousands of years beyond the time limits given

by Jesus and John (Matthew 24:34; Revelation 22:6-7).

Revelation 21:8
But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.
† John again identified the lake of fire as the second death. This repeated explanation is important because Scripture interprets its own symbolism (Revelation 20:14).
† The contrast is between those who inherit life in God's presence and those excluded because of unbelief and wickedness (Revelation 21:6-7).
† The New Jerusalem represents the fulfilled covenant relationship between God and His people. Those who belong to Christ have access to the water of life, while those who reject Him remain outside that covenant blessing (Revelation 21:9-10; Revelation 22:14-15).
† The second death isn't presented as a future event awaiting another worldwide resurrection. Within the fulfilled framework, Revelation's judgment reached its prophetic completion in the first century (Revelation 1:3; Revelation 22:10).

John 3:36
He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.
† Jesus didn't say believers would receive eternal life thousands of years later. He said those who believe already have eternal life (John 5:24).
† Those who reject the Son won't see life. This directly supports the distinction between possessing eternal life and remaining under God's judgment (1 John 5:12).
† The issue isn't whether God has the authority to judge. The issue is whether Scripture teaches that those who reject Christ receive endless conscious existence. Jesus consistently presented eternal life as something received through faith in

Him (John 3:16; Romans 6:23).

Historical References

† Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the early second century, contrasted life in Christ with the destructive consequences of unbelief. His writings demonstrate that early Christians understood salvation as receiving life through Jesus Christ.

† Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the second century in Against Heresies, Book 2, Chapter 34, taught that continued existence depends upon God's will. His discussion challenges the assumption that human beings possess immortality independently of God.

† Arnobius of Sicca, writing in the early fourth century in Against the Heathen, Book 2, argued that souls aren't naturally immortal and can perish. His position demonstrates that the destruction of the wicked wasn't an invention of modern Christianity.

† Augustine of Hippo, writing in the early fifth century in The City of God, Book 21, defended eternal conscious punishment. His position became highly influential in Western Christianity and represents an important historical alternative to conditional immortality.

† Edward Fudge, in The Fire That Consumes, examined biblical language concerning death, destruction, and final punishment. He argued that the wicked ultimately perish rather than remain conscious forever.

† These historical writers didn't all agree. Their differences remind us that Christian history contains more than one interpretation of final punishment. Our final authority must remain Scripture rather than the popularity or age of a particular tradition (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

How It Applies To Us Today

† We shouldn't frighten people into following Christ by presenting endless torture as though every detail were explicitly established by Scripture. Jesus called people to receive eternal life through Him (John 3:16; John 10:10).

† God's judgment is serious because rejecting Christ means

rejecting the only source of eternal life. Scripture repeatedly warns about perishing, destruction, and death (Romans 6:23; 1 John 5:12).
† We must also distinguish between the completed prophetic judgments of the first century and the continuing spiritual consequences of accepting or rejecting Christ. The fulfillment of Revelation doesn't mean everyone automatically possesses eternal life (John 3:36; Revelation 22:10).
† Those who belong to Christ don't need to fear death as though it could separate them permanently from Him. Paul expressed confidence that departing this physical life meant being with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Philippians 1:23).
† Our responsibility isn't to determine the eternal condition of every individual. God knows the heart, and His judgments are righteous. Our responsibility is to proclaim Jesus Christ and the life available through Him (John 5:22-24; Acts 17:30-31).
† The good news isn't merely that people can escape punishment. It's that Jesus has overcome death and opened the way into fellowship with the Father (John 11:25-26; Hebrews 10:19-22).

Q & A Appendix
Q: Does Scripture teach that unbelievers will suffer consciously forever?
A: Some passages are interpreted that way, particularly Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 14:11. However, the repeated descriptions of perishing, death, destruction, and the second death provide strong support for understanding the final punishment as irreversible destruction rather than endless conscious torment (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Revelation 21:8).
Q: What does eternal punishment mean?
A: Eternal punishment can describe punishment with permanent consequences. The punishment never loses its effect, even if the act of destruction isn't continuously repeated. This interpretation understands eternal destruction as final and irreversible (Matthew 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9).
Q: Doesn't Revelation 14:11 say the smoke of their torment

rises forever?
A: Yes. However, Revelation uses prophetic imagery drawn from Old Testament judgments. Isaiah described Edom's smoke rising forever, yet that judgment concerned a historical nation. The imagery can communicate permanent destruction and an irreversible judgment rather than endless conscious suffering (Isaiah 34:9-10; Revelation 14:9-11).
Q: Doesn't Jesus teach that the fire will never be extinguished?
A: Yes. Unquenchable fire describes fire that cannot be stopped before accomplishing its purpose. Jeremiah used similar language concerning Jerusalem's destruction. It doesn't necessarily mean that whatever is burning must remain alive forever (Jeremiah 17:27; Mark 9:43-48).
Q: What about the rich man and Lazarus?
A: Jesus described the rich man suffering in Hades, not the lake of fire. Hades and the lake of fire aren't identical because Revelation describes Hades itself being thrown into the lake of fire. The account shouldn't automatically be treated as a literal description of the final condition of every unbeliever (Luke 16:19-31; Revelation 20:14).
Q: If Revelation was fulfilled in AD 70, does that mean nobody faces consequences for rejecting Christ today?
A: No. The fulfillment of first-century prophecy doesn't eliminate the continuing distinction between those who possess life in Christ and those who reject Him. Jesus taught that whoever believes has eternal life, while whoever rejects the Son won't see life (John 3:36; 1 John 5:12).
Q: Do unbelievers go to Hades when they die today?
A: From the fulfilled perspective, Hades was emptied and abolished in the completed judgment associated with AD 70. Scripture doesn't teach that Hades continues operating as a waiting place after its destruction in Revelation (Revelation 20:13-14).
Q: What ultimately happens to someone who dies rejecting Christ?
A: The conditional immortality understanding is that such a person doesn't receive eternal life and ultimately perishes.

Death and destruction are the final consequences of rejecting the life available through Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Matthew 10:28; Romans 6:23; 1 John 5:12).
Q: Does God want unbelievers to perish?
A: Scripture teaches that God desires repentance rather than destruction. His patience demonstrates His mercy, and the invitation to receive life through Jesus Christ remains open (Ezekiel 18:23; 2 Peter 3:9).
Q: Can we say that every unbeliever will eventually be saved?
A: Scripture doesn't give us a basis for promising universal salvation regardless of faith in Christ. Jesus explicitly distinguished between those who possess eternal life and those who won't see life (John 3:36; 1 John 5:12).
Q: What is the central message we should teach about the final destiny of unbelievers?
A: Eternal life is God's gift through Jesus Christ. Those who reject Him reject that life. The biblical language of perishing, destruction, death, and the second death supports the conclusion that the ultimate consequence is permanent destruction rather than everlasting conscious existence in torment (John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Matthew 10:28; Revelation 21:8).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †
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Source Index
† John 3:16; Romans 6:23; Matthew 10:28; Matthew 7:13; 1 John 5:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Matthew 25:46; Malachi 4:1, 3; Obadiah 1:16; Revelation 20:14-15; Revelation 21:8; John 3:36.
† Ignatius of Antioch, early second century; Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, Book 2, Chapter 34; Arnobius of Sicca, Against the Heathen, Book 2; Augustine of Hippo, The City of God, Book 21; Edward Fudge, The Fire That Consumes.

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