

The Early Church Fathers on Hell

The Early Fathers believed in a literal hell. A place where unrepentant sinners would spend their eternity separated from God. A place where all hope would be abandoned and where misery and suffering would be a constant companion. The idea that the Bible's torturous descriptions of hell were somehow symbolic of non-existence, as Jehovah's Witnesses claim, was something that would have been totally foreign to them. To the Fathers, if Jesus said that something was eternal and torturous, (Matthew 25:46, Luke 16:24) then that is what it was. Rather than water down Jesus' words they instead chose to use them to warn the faithful as Jesus Himself did.

Ignatius of Antioch

Corrupters of families will not inherit the kingdom of God. And if they who do these things according to the flesh suffer death, how much more if a man corrupt by evil reaching the faith of God for the sake of which Jesus Christ was crucified? A man become so foul will depart into unquenchable fire, and so will anyone who listens to him (*Letter to the Ephesians* 16:1-2 [A.D. 110]).

Clement of Rome

If we do the will of Christ, we shall obtain rest; but if not, if we neglect his commandments, nothing will rescue us from eternal punishment (*Second Clement* 5:5 [A.D. 150]).

Justin Martyr

No more is it possible for the evildoer, the avaricious, and the treacherous to hide from God than it is for the virtuous. Every man will receive the eternal punishment or reward which his actions deserve. Indeed, if all men recognized this, no one would choose evil even for a short time, knowing that he would incur the eternal sentence of fire. On the contrary, he would take every means to control himself and to adorn himself in virtue, so that he might obtain the good gifts of God and escape the punishments (*First Apology* 12 [A.D. 151]).

[Jesus] shall come from the heavens in glory with his angelic host, when he shall raise the bodies of all the men who ever lived. Then he will clothe the worthy in immortality; but the wicked, clothed in eternal sensibility, he will commit to the eternal fire, along with the evil demons (*ibid.* 52).

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Fixing their minds on the grace of Christ, [the martyrs] despised worldly tortures and purchased eternal life with but a single hour. To them, the fire of their cruel torturers was cold. They kept before their eyes their escape from the eternal and unquenchable fire (2:3 [A.D. 155]).

Athenagoras

We [Christians] are persuaded that when we are removed from this present life we shall live another life, better than the present one. . . . Then we shall abide near God and with God, changeless and free from suffering in the soul . . . or if we fall with the rest [of mankind], a worse one and in fire; for God has not made us as sheep or beasts of burden, a mere incidental work, that we should perish and be annihilated (*Plea for the Christians* 31 [A.D. 177]).

Theophilus of Antioch

Give studious attention to the prophetic writings [the Bible] and they will lead you on a clearer path to escape the eternal punishments and to obtain the eternal good things of God... [God] will examine everything and will judge justly, granting recompense to each according to merit. To those who seek immortality by the patient exercise of good works, he will give everlasting life, joy, peace, rest, and all good things. . . . For the unbelievers and for the contemptuous and for those who do not submit to the truth but assent to iniquity, when they have been involved in adulteries, and fornications, and homosexualities, and avarice, and in lawless idolatries, there will be wrath and indignation, tribulation and anguish; and in the end, such men as these will be detained in everlasting fire (*To Autolycus* 1:14 [A.D. 181]).

Irenaeus

The penalty increases for those who do not believe the Word of God and despise his coming. . . . It is not merely temporal, but eternal. To whomsoever the Lord shall say, "Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire," they will be damned forever (*Against Heresies* 4:28:2 [A.D. 189]).

Hippolytus

Standing before [Christ's] judgment, all of them, men, angels, and demons, crying out in one voice, shall say: "Just is your judgment!" And the righteousness of that cry will be apparent in the recompense made to each. To those who have done well, everlasting enjoyment shall be given; while to the lovers of evil shall be given eternal punishment. The unquenchable and unending fire awaits these latter, and a certain fiery worm which does not die and which does not waste the body but continually bursts forth from the body with unceasing pain. No sleep will give them rest; no night will soothe them; no death will deliver them from punishment; no appeal of interceding friends will profit them (*Against the Greeks* 3 [A.D. 212]).

Minucius Felix

I am not ignorant of the fact that many, in the consciousness of what they deserve, would rather hope than actually believe that there is nothing for them after death. They would prefer to be annihilated rather than be restored for punishment. . . . Nor is there measure nor end to these torments. That clever fire burns the limbs and restores them, wears them away and yet sustains them, just as fiery thunderbolts strike bodies but do not consume them (*Octavius* 34:12-5:3 [A.D. 226]).

Cyprian of Carthage

An ever-burning Gehenna and the punishment of being devoured by living flames will consume the condemned; nor will there be any way in which the tormented can ever have respite or be at an end. Souls along with their bodies will be preserved for suffering in unlimited agonies. . . . The grief at punishment will then be without the fruit of repentance; weeping will be useless, and prayer ineffectual. Too late will they believe in eternal punishment, who would not believe in eternal life (*To Demetrian* 24 [A.D. 252]).

Lactantius

We therefore speak better and more truly, who say that the two ways belong to heaven and hell, because immortality is promised to the righteous, and everlasting punishment is threatened to the unrighteous (*Divine Institutes* 6 [A.D. 307]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

We shall be raised therefore, all with our bodies eternal, but not all with bodies alike; For if a man is righteous, he will receive a heavenly body, that he may be able worthily to hold converse with angels; but if a man is a sinner, he shall receive an eternal body, fitted to endure the penalties of sins, that he may burn eternally in fire, nor ever be consumed. And righteously will God assign this portion to either company; for we do nothing without the body. We blaspheme with the mouth, and with the mouth we pray. With the body we commit fornication, and with the body we keep chastity. With the hand we rob, and by the hand we bestow alms; and the rest in like manner. Since then the body has been our minister in all things, it shall also share with us in the future the fruits of the past (*Catechetical Lectures* 18:19 [A.D. 350]).

John Chrysostom

This is no small subject of enquiry which we propose, but rather about things which are of the first necessity and which all men enquire about; namely, whether hell fire have any end. For that it hath no end Christ indeed declared when he said, "Their fire shall not be quenched, and their worm shall not die" (*Homily 9 on 1 Corinthians* 3:12-15 [circa A.D. 388]).