THE QUESTION

How can hell be both fire and outer darkness?

Asked by a THF member on August 31, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 8 numbered quotations · the 27 early Christian passages and 118 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/how-can-hell-be-both-fire-and-outer-darkness

The short answer *Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words*

The early writers did not see a conflict. They spoke of fire and darkness together. Fire is God's punishment, and darkness is the loss of God's light, which the wicked chose to flee. They also taught that the divine fire is not like the ordinary fire we use, so it need not behave like it.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 6

Fire and darkness are named together

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Lactantius describes the coming judgment with both images at once. He speaks of fire and darkness in the black night. Later he says the wicked will be hidden in darkness and kept for punishment. He does not treat the two as a contradiction.

1 “When He comes, there will be fire and darkness in the middle of the black night.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 19 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 26, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

2 “Instead, they will be hidden in the same darkness with the wicked, appointed for certain punishment.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 21 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 25, page 7** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 6

The lake of fire is eternal fire

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Irenaeus follows Revelation, where death and hell are thrown into the lake of fire. He says this is the same as Gehenna, the eternal fire the Lord spoke of. Tatian's Gospel harmony records the Lord's words sending the cursed into that eternal fire.

3 “This is what is called Gehenna, which the Lord referred to as eternal fire.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book V* (c. 175–202 AD) **Source 12, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

4 “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his hosts.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Tatian,** *Diatessaron* 43 (c. 150–180 AD) **Source 9, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 6

Darkness fits those who flee the light

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Irenaeus explains the darkness by what people choose. God gives light to those who seek it. Those who turn away from His light blind themselves, and God gives them the darkness that matches their choice. The darkness is a fitting result, not a random punishment.

5

"He generously provides the light that those who seek the light of incorruption desire; but for those who despise and mock, avoiding and turning away from this light, effectively blinding themselves, He has prepared darkness appropriate for those who oppose light, and delivered a fitting punishment upon those who try to avoid submission to Him."

later in the same passage

"Those who avoid rest will rightfully face punishment, and those who shun light will rightfully dwell in darkness."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book IV* (c. 175–202 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 11, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 4 OF 6

Darkness means losing every good thing

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Irenaeus compares this to sunlight. People who hide from the light put themselves in the dark, and the light is not to blame. In the same way, those who flee God's eternal light live in eternal darkness, without any of the good things found in God.

6

"Similarly, those who flee the eternal light of God, which contains all good things, become the cause for themselves of living in eternal darkness, lacking all good things, having made themselves the cause of their existence in such an abode."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Irenaeus,** *Against Heresies: Book IV* (c. 175–202 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 11, page 6 Read it in the library ›

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POINT 5 OF 6

Origen saw darkness as deep ignorance

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Origen offers his own view carefully. He thinks outer darkness may mean less a dark place and more a state of deep ignorance, cut off from the light of understanding. He even suggests the wicked may be clothed with dark bodies that show this inner darkness.

7

"But the outer darkness, in my judgment, is to be understood not so much as some dark atmosphere without any light, but as those persons who, having been plunged into the darkness of profound ignorance, have been placed beyond the reach of any light of the understanding."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 10 (c. 215–254 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 19, page 6 Read it in the library ›

POINT 6 OF 6

The divine fire is unlike ordinary fire

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Lactantius says the divine fire burns the wicked and also restores what it burns, so it feeds itself forever. It even draws back from the righteous. A fire like this does not act the way our fires do, so we should not expect it to follow the rules of an earthly flame.

8

"Therefore, the same divine fire, with one and the same force and power, will both burn the wicked and form them again. It will restore as much of their bodies as it consumes, and it will keep feeding itself forever."

later in the same passage

"So great is the power of innocence that the flame draws back from it without causing harm."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 21 (c. 290–320 AD)
THF's updated English

Source 25, page 7 Read it in the library ›

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THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages do not explain hell's fire by kinds of earthly flame, such as fires that give little light.
- Origen's reading of outer darkness is offered as his own opinion, not as the settled teaching of the church.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 27 early Christian passages and 118 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–27, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 28–60, in Bible order), then 85 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *27 passages from 13 writers*

Clement of Rome, *c. 88–99 AD · source 1*

1 *Second Epistle* 17 (on point 2) “their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched… [continues online] **read ›**

Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · sources 2–5*

2 *Dialogue with Trypho* and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven: but the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness.' And, 'Many shall say to Me in that day, Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

3 *Dialogue with Trypho* (on point 2) we know from Isaiah that the bodies of those who have sinned will be consumed by the worm and unquenchable fire, remaining immortal, becoming a spectacle to all flesh. But… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Second Apology* (1885 English; on point 2) “they, having been shut up in eternal fire, shall suffer their just punishment and penalty… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *First Apology* (on point 2) “we believe that those who live wickedly and do not repent are punished in everlasting fire… [continues online] **read ›**

Minucius Felix, *c. 150–270 AD · source 6*

6 *Octavius* 24 (1885 English; on point 6) “the fires of Mount Ætna and of Mount Vesuvius, and of burning lands everywhere, glow, but are not wasted… [continues online] **read ›**

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Tatian, *c. 150–180 AD · sources 7–9*

7 *Diatessaron* 25 (on point 2) “into life crippled or maimed than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the hell of fire that burns forever, where their worm does not die… [continues online] **read ›**

8 *Diatessaron* 43 (1885 English) “25:30 And the unprofitable servant, put him forth into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Diatessaron* 43 (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 2** “25:46 And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 10–14*

10 *Against Heresies: Book IV* who haven’t received the Holy Spirit due to their wicked behavior, He says, "will be cast into outer darkness." This makes clear that the same King who gathered the… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Against Heresies: Book IV* **Quotes 5, 6, page 3** all things in advance, prepared suitable places for both groups. He generously provides the light that those who seek the light of incorruption desire; but for those who despise and… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *Against Heresies: Book V* **Quote 3, page 2** “the books were opened. Moreover," he says, "the book of life was opened, and the dead were judged… [continues online] **read ›**

13 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English) “the children of the kingdom shall go into outer darkness… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English; on point 2) “in the other, really, enduringly, and more rigidly: for the fire is eternal, and the wrath of God which shall be revealed from heaven from the face of our Lord… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 15–16*

15 *Stromata* 1.1 (1885 English) “the useless servant shall be cast into outer darkness… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Instructor* 1.10 (1885 English) “also that was said, They that fall into sins shall be cast into outer darkness, where there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth, and the like… [continues online] **read ›**

Hippolytus, *c. 200–236 AD · sources 17–18*

17 *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* 1 (on point 2) “their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Against Plato* 1 “sleep will give them rest. No night will soothe them… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 19–20*

19 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 10 **Quote 7, page 4** “But the outer darkness, in my judgment, is to be understood not… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 10 (on point 6) “he says, "Walk in the light of your own fire, and in the flame which you have kindled… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 21–22*

21 *Treatises* (on point 2) “to believe here, and then they will be unable to return so that they may believe. An ever-burning Gehenna will consume the condemned, with a punishment that devours by… [continues online] **read ›**

22 *Epistles* (on point 2) His divine knowledge. Then He will send the guilty to Gehenna, and He will set our persecutors on fire with the endless burning of a punishment by fire. But to… [continues online] **read ›**

Commodianus, *c. 250–300 AD · source 23*

23 *Writings* (on point 2) “the flame of fire the Lord will judge the wicked… [continues online] **read ›**

Methodius, *c. 270–311 AD · source 24*

24 *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* (on point 6) as will be forever undecaying and indissoluble. For I once saw on Olympus, a mountain of Lycia, fire bursting up from the ground by itself on the summit of the… [continues online] **read ›**

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Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · sources 25–26*

25 *Divine Institutes* 21 **Quotes 2, 8, pages 2, 4** "the same divine fire, with one and the same force and power, will both burn the wicked and form them again. It will restore as much of their bodies as… [continues online] **read ›**

26 *Divine Institutes* 19 (1885 English) **Quote 1, page 2** "He shall come, there will be fire and darkness in the midst of the black night… [continues online] **read ›**

Peter of Alexandria, *c. 300–311 AD · source 27*

27 *Genuine Acts of Peter* (on point 6) as will be forever undecaying and indissoluble. For I once saw on Olympus, a mountain of Lycia, fire bursting up from the ground by itself on the top of the… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *33 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

28 **Matthew 8:12** but the children of the kingdom will be thrown out into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." **read ›**

29 **Matthew 12:1** At that time, Jesus went on the Sabbath day through the grain fields. His disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. **read ›**

30 **Matthew 12:2** But the Pharisees, when they saw it, said to him, "Behold, your disciples do what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." **read ›**

31 **Matthew 12:8** For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." **read ›**

32 **Matthew 22:13** Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and throw him into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' **read ›**

33 **Matthew 25:30** Throw out the unprofitable slave into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' **read ›**

34 **Matthew 25:41** Then he will say also to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; **read ›**

35 **Matthew 25:46** These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." **read ›**

36 **Mark 2:24** The Pharisees said to him, "Behold, why do they do that which is not lawful on the Sabbath day?" **read ›**

37 **Mark 2:27** He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. **read ›**

38 **Mark 9:44** where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. **read ›**

39 **Mark 9:46** where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. **read ›**

40 **Mark 9:48** where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. **read ›**

41 **Luke 6:2** But some of the Pharisees said to them, "Why do you do that which is not lawful to do on the Sabbath day?" **read ›**

42 **John 3:36** He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who disobeys the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." **read ›**

43 **John 7:23** If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath so that the Law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I made a whole man well on the Sabbath? **read ›**

44 **Acts 5:14** More believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. **read ›**

45 **Acts 8:22** Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to God that perhaps the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. **read ›**

46 **Romans 14:5** One man esteems one day as more important. Another esteems every day alike. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind. **read ›**

47 **Galatians 5:1** Stand firm therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of slavery. **read ›**

48 **Ephesians 1:13** In him you also, having heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and having believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, **read ›**

49 **Colossians 2:16** Let no one therefore judge you in eating or drinking, or with respect to a feast day or a new moon or a Sabbath day, **read ›**

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50 **2 Thessalonians 1:8** in flaming fire, giving vengeance to those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus, **read ›**

51 **2 Thessalonians 1:9** who will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, **read ›**

52 **Hebrews 10:27** but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and a fierceness of fire which will devour the adversaries. **read ›**

53 **Hebrews 10:31** It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. **read ›**

54 **2 Peter 2:17** These are wells without water, clouds driven by a storm, for whom the blackness of darkness has been reserved forever. **read ›**

55 **Jude 1:13** wild waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the blackness of darkness has been reserved forever. **read ›**

56 **Revelation 4:5** Out of the throne proceed lightnings, sounds, and thunders. There were seven lamps of fire burning before his throne, which are the seven spirits of God. **read ›**

57 **Revelation 14:10** he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is prepared unmixed in the cup of his anger. He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. **read ›**

58 **Revelation 20:10** The devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are also. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever. **read ›**

59 **Revelation 20:14** Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. **read ›**

60 **Revelation 20:15** If anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *85 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Proverbs 8:4

Isaiah 9:6 · 42:1 · 50:11

Daniel 7:13

Matthew 3:17 · 5:12 · 5:34 · 5:35 · 7:12 · 7:22 · 8:11 · 10:15 · 11:3 · 11:9 · 13:13 · 13:17 · 18:32 · 21:13 · 22:7 · 25:34 · 26:35

Mark 10:38

Luke 1:6 · 1:17 · 1:46 · 1:67 · 1:76 · 2:8 · 2:22 · 2:23 · 2:28 · 2:29 · 5:31 · 7:19 · 7:26 · 9:22 · 10:19 · 13:6 · 14:27 · 15:4 · 16:31 · 18:10 · 19:22

John 4:41 · 4:42 · 5:46 · 8:36 · 11:25

Acts 3:12 · 4:24 · 4:32 · 4:33 · 7:56 · 14:15 · 15:14

Romans 1:1 · 1:32 · 2:15 · 3:23

1 Corinthians 2:9 · 3:12 · 6:7 · 7:31 · 8:4 · 12:28

Galatians 4:26

Ephesians 1:21 · 4:8 · 4:9 · 5:13 · 5:32

Colossians 1:14

1 Timothy 6:4

2 Timothy 2:1 · 2:2 · 2:24 · 4:10

1 Peter 2:23 · 4:14

Revelation 20:11 · 20:12 · 21:1 · 21:2 · 21:5

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Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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THE END OF THIS STUDY