

# Evangelicalism & Eternal Retribution



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**W**ill the destiny of the unsaved be eternal conscious torment or annihilation (total cessation of existence)?

The eternal conscious punishment of the lost has always been a fundamental doctrine of Christian orthodoxy. Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Edwards, Pieper, Berkhof, Shedd, Chafer, Erickson, and other theologians affirmed the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment as a biblical essential - explicitly defining divine eternal punishment against annihilation.<sup>1</sup>

But in recent years some prominent professing evangelicals have advocated conditional annihilationism (which includes the concept of postmortem evangelizing of those who die without having heard the gospel). Examples include Philip E. Hughes, Clark H. Pinnock, John R. W. Stott, John W. Wenham. Others, like Rob Bell, have recently apparently advocated a form of universalism, in which all who die in unbelief will come to faith in the Gospel upon hearing it after they die.

So how are we to understand all of this from a biblical perspective?

## BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR ETERNAL RETRIBUTION

The doctrine of eternal conscious punishment asserts that after physical death on earth, the soul of the unsaved person immediately enters a state and place of continual conscious torment. The condemned state will culminate in bodily resurrection, final judgment, and then unending torment in the lake of fire. Following are major passages supporting this doctrine.

Daniel 12:1-2 contrasts "everlasting life" with "everlasting contempt." If "life" will be unending conscious blessing, "contempt" must also be unending conscious disgrace.

Matthew 25:46 contrasts the condemnation of the wicked, "everlasting punishment," with the blessing of the righteous, "eternal life." So if eternal life will be consciously experienced without end, "everlasting punishment" will also be

consciously experienced without end.

And since Matthew 25:41 designates "everlasting fire" as the means of the "everlasting punishment," then the punishment will indeed be agonizing.

The unimaginable pain is depicted by the "wailing and gnashing of teeth of the wicked in the furnace of fire" (13:42, 50), to which they will be sent in judgment by Christ at His Second Advent (13:41-42, 49-50). Note that the Lord Jesus spoke much about hell and eternal conscious punishment. Examples: Matthew 5:21-22, 27-30; 8:11-12; 10:28; 13:30, 40-43, 49-50; 18:6-9; 23:15, 33; 24:51; 25:30, 41, 46; Mark 9:42-48; Luke 16:19-31.

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In Mark 9:42-48, Jesus used Isaiah 66:24 (three times in the Majority Text) to give a picture of people in hell: "Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." The picture is of unending consumption by worms and fire, a consumption that never ends. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says that unbelievers will be "punished with everlasting destruction," indicating a process of destruction that never ends.

Revelation 14:9-11 depicts unbelievers as ultimately objects of the unmitigated "wrath of God" by being "tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb." That this conscious torment will never end is shown by verse 11: "the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night." This passage depicts people being tormented without end by

burning without end. Revelation 20:10-15 sustains this interpretation by using identical terms in v. 10 to describe “the devil,” “the beast and the false prophet” in “the lake of fire and brimstone” being “tormented day and night forever and ever.” And this unending torment in “the lake of fire” will then be experienced by the unrighteous in “the second death” (Revelation 20:14-15).

### ANSWERING ANNIHILATION’S ARGUMENTS

Professing evangelical theologians who contend for annihilationism use arguments that are not biblically sound. Here are some of their arguments and the responses to their arguments.

**Argument 1:** God in His love could never be cruel and vindictive, so He would never punish His enemies endlessly.<sup>2</sup>

**Argument 2:** The doctrine of eternal conscious punishment in a torture chamber is emotionally repugnant and intolerable.<sup>3</sup>

**Response:** These are arguments from human emotion which should never be the measure of truth. Also, if one has difficulty reconciling eternal punishment with divine love, it is just as difficult to reconcile divine love with any punishment.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is presumptuous for finite, fallen creatures to claim to know the full extent of divine love or how it harmonizes with divine justice. Finally, in heaven our perspective and emotions will be different as we see things from the divine perspective.

Indeed, the saints in heaven (who are morally perfected) are depicted as crying out for avenging judgment of the wicked and praising God for executing this vengeance (see Revelation 6:10; 19:1-3).

**Argument 3:** Only God is immortal. God grants immortality only to believers. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is from Greek philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Annihilationists believe that Tertullian and Augustine were especially responsible for corrupting Christian theology with the Platonic concept of the immortality of the soul.<sup>6</sup>

**Response:** Passages asserting that conscious existence continues after death for both the righteous (2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Philippians 1:23) and the unrighteous (Luke 16:19-31) support the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

In this respect, it must be noted that annihilationists assume that human “immortality” means a blessed life, whereas in mainstream Christian theology it means existence.

Second, while Tertullian and Augustine have some affinity with aspects of Platonic thought on the immortality of the soul, they base their doctrine on Scripture. And their concept of immortality was not that of Plato, which included the preexistence of the soul and the belief that the immortality of the soul is inherent. Rather, orthodox Christian theologians have always held that the soul was created and given immortality by God.

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**Argument 4:** Eternal conscious torment is incompatible with sin that occurs in time, so eternal conscious torment violates the justice of God. Stott contends that there is a “serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity.”<sup>7</sup>

**Response:** Annihilationist concepts of God’s justice and the gravity of sin are not biblical but rather based on the assumptions of human reason. Throughout the Bible there are divine judgments that, from a human perspective, seem out of proportion to the offenses: Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt for only a glance (Genesis 19:26); Nadab and Abihu killed only for improper worship (Numbers 3:4); a man stoned for gathering sticks on the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36); Uzzah killed for trying to keep the ark of God from falling (2 Samuel 6:6-7); Ananias and Sapphira killed for lying (Acts 5:1-10). And then there was the punishment of physical and spiritual death and eternal condemnation - that God brought on the whole human race for one man’s sin. But each of these contexts reveals the reason for such harsh punishment: the offenses were committed against God.

So for each sin, because it is against God, man deserves eternal punishment.

Peterson notes, “The Bible views sin as an attack on God’s character and therefore deserving of great punishment.”<sup>8</sup> So we must base our concept of God’s justice and just punishment of man not on human standards of justice, but on God’s character as revealed in the Bible. Since God is eternally holy, any sin deserves an eternal punishment, not a punishment restricted to a period of time. As Aquinas said, “the magnitude of the punishment matches the magnitude of the sin.... Now a sin that is against God is infinite; the higher the person against whom it is committed, the graver the sin ... and God is of infinite greatness. Therefore an infinite punishment is deserved for a sin committed against him.”<sup>9</sup>

**Argument 5:** “Eternal punishment” is satisfied by annihilation, because it is something that is never undone.<sup>10</sup>

**Response:** In Matthew 25:41, 46, eternal life is contrasted with eternal punishment. Matthew 25:41 asserts that the unrighteous will share the same punishment as “the devil and his angels.” And Revelation 20:10 says that the devil will be “tormented day and night forever and ever” in the lake of fire. Annihilation does not satisfy the biblical concept of eternal punishment.

**Argument 6:** “Fire” depicts total consumption and therefore annihilation.<sup>11</sup>

**Response:** Jesus states that when “fire” is used of eternal punishment, it causes agonizing pain, “wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:41-42, 49-50). And Revelation shows that the “lake of fire” is a place of endless “torment” (Revelation 20:10). Furthermore, in Luke 16:23-28, the rich man in Hades is “tormented in this flame.” When used of eternal punishment, “fire” signifies intense pain being inflicted, but not total consumption. Revelation 14:10-11; 20:10 teach that those being tormented with the “fire and brimstone” of eternal punishment will be tormented “day and night forever and ever.” Also, note that one thousand years after being sent to the “lake of fire” (Revelation 19:20), the beast and the false prophet will still exist (Revelation 20:10).

**Argument 7:** “Death” and “destruction” prove that the punishment is annihilation, not unending conscious torment. Annihilationists assume that

death and destruction can mean only annihilation.<sup>12</sup>

**Response:** The concept of death in Scripture never means nonexistence, but rather separation. Physical death is separation of the soul from the body (Ecclesiastes 12:7; James 2:26; John 19:30; Philippians 1:23-24; 2 Corinthians 5:8; 2 Peter 1:14), not cessation of existence. Spiritual death is separation from fellowship with God, not cessation of existence. In Genesis 3:22-24, spiritual death is separation from blessing and fellowship with God. Adam and Eve were not annihilated. According to Ephesians 2:1, unsaved people are "dead in trespasses and sins," which is further clarified in verse 12 as being "without Christ."

Also, studies of the biblical terms used for "destruction" show that ruin, not nonexistence, is the result indicated by these terms. The verb *apollumi* ("to destroy") and the noun *apoleia* ("destruction") refer to ruin, not to cessation of existence. Some examples are: the "lost" coin of Luke 15:8-9; the broken old wineskins of Matthew 9:17; existence in punishment (perishing) contrasted with existence in blessing (eternal life) in John 3:16.<sup>13</sup>

Also, note that *katastrepho* and *katastrophe* mean destruction in the sense of "overturning, ruin," not cessation of existence. Some examples are: overturning tables (Matthew 21:12); ruining hearers (2 Timothy 2:14); destroying Sodom and Gomorrah by burning to ashes (2 Peter 2:6). And *olethros* means destruction by changing to another kind of existence (1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Timothy 6:9).

### THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSION

Annihilationism is false teaching. It is not evangelical doctrine.

It exalts God's love above His other attributes and so distorts the doctrine of God's love and God's nature. It is ultimately founded on human emotion and human reason, and so it humanizes God by defining God's love and justice by human concepts of love and justice.

It diminishes God's justice and the nature of sin. If annihilation is a sufficient payment for sin, then sin is not a violation of God's eternal holiness. And if annihilation is the punishment of sin, and sin is against an eternally holy

God, then the punishment does not fit the crime, because annihilation is not an eternal punishment.

It devalues the death of Christ by making His death less than a truly eternal punishment for sin.

And it may lead to the belief that Christ was annihilated, since in His death He paid the penalty for sin: which, in annihilationism, is cessation of all existence. If so, then the Son of God would either have been temporarily non-existent, and the Trinity would have had only two members, or the human and divine natures would have been temporarily divided. And if, in response, it is argued that Jesus need have suffered only a token punishment for sin, rather than annihilation, then, again, God's holiness and justice and the content and meaning of Christ's payment would be diminished.

The doctrine of eternal retribution asserts the awful judgment of sin and so is not immediately "comfortable." But we can and must be confident that it is God's truth, revealed in Scripture. It magnifies God's holiness and justice and love, since His love reaches out to save people from such a terrible punishment. It magnifies God's salvation through the death and resurrection of His Son. And it is used to effectively persuade people to receive salvation through Christ.

Biblically, theologically, and evangelistically, we dare not deny the doctrine of eternal retribution. We must believe it and proclaim it, for the glory of God and the salvation of people.

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### END NOTES

1. Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1995), pp. 97-137.
2. Clark Pinnock, "The Conditional View," *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William Crockett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 140.
3. Clark Pinnock, "Fire, Then Nothing," *Christianity Today*, 20 March 1987, pp. 40-41; John R. W. Stott, "Judgment and Hell," *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), pp. 314-15.
4. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 1150.
5. Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes* (Houston: Providential), 1982, pp. 51ff. Evangelicals should beware of being associated with Edward Fudge concerning immortality,

since he believes that the soul is not a separate aspect of man, and, at death, the whole person becomes nonexistent until the resurrection. Only at the resurrection will God give immortality to believers. The unrighteous will be raised only to be annihilated.

6. Clark Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent," *Criswell Theological Review* (Vol. 4/ No. 2, 1990), pp. 246-47.
7. Stott, "Judgement and Hell," pp. 318-319.
8. Robert A. Peterson, "A Traditionalist Response to John Stott's Arguments for Annihilationism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Volume 37, December 1994), pp. 561-64.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia2ae.87,4 (as quoted by Peterson, "A Traditionalist Response to John Stott's Arguments for Annihilationism," p. 563.
10. Stott, "Judgement and Hell," p. 317
11. Stott, "Judgement and Hell," p. 316
12. Stott "Judgement and Hell," p. 316; Pinnock, "The Conditional View," p. 146.
13. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966), pp. 521-522.

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